



RELEASE THAT WITCH

BOOK 10

Er Mu

EPUB CREATION BY LISA HAYES

Release That Witch

(放开那个女巫)

by

Er Mu

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Synopsis

Cheng Yan transmigrated only to end up in a medieval Europe like world, becoming Roland, a Royal Prince. But this world doesn't seem to be the same as his former world, despite some similarities. Witches are real and they actually can use magic?

Follow Roland's battle for the throne against his siblings. Will he be able to win, even though the king already declared him to be a hopeless case and with the worst starting situation? With his knowledge of modern technologies and the help of the witches, who are known as devils' servants and are hunted by the the Holy Church, he might have a fighting chance.

Now, let his journey begin.

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English Translation by Roxerer @ [Volare Novels](#)

Translation Edits by Disco Pangolin and KitKat @ [Volare Novels](#)

ePub conversion by Lisa Hayes @ [Hasseno Blog](#)

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Chapter 901: The Witches From Afar (Part III)

"What do you want to know?" Azima said as she glanced at her.

"Scroll..." Wendy held her hand, looking pretty worried. If what Tilly said was true, these people did not come to Neverwinter voluntarily. Their visit was instead due to internal conflict among the witches from Sleeping Island. If this problem was not properly resolved, not only would the Witch Union be involved in the mess, but would also lose the newcomers' trust. The would have defeated the whole point of getting the new witches to come here.

"Don't worry," Scroll raised one of her eyebrows and then turned to the witch who wanted to return to the Eastern Region. "You miss your hometown, which means that you most likely weren't abandoned by your family. Like other refugees who fled to Sleeping Island, you were forced to leave the Eastern Region under the pressure of the church. Right?"

"So what?" Azima cut in.

"Let me tell you about the current state of the Eastern Region." Ignoring the red-haired witch's provocation, Scroll replied indifferently, "That area has not been fully recovered by the King ever since Garcia the Queen of Clearwater plundered Seawindshire and Valencia. The area was first devastated by the demonic plague spread by the church and was then ravaged by the army of Timothy. Farmlands in all surrounding areas are deserted, and people can't sustain themselves. Many of those people have become refugees."

The witch showed a troubled look but was not willing to relent. "If we don't go take a look ourselves, who knows whether you're telling the truth?"

"Two years ago, His Majesty Roland started to take in those

refugees. Now the population of Neverwinter has exceeded 100,000, 70% of which are from other cities, with the majority of them being refugees from the Eastern Region and the Southern Territory," Scroll spoke calmly. "Your family members are most likely amongst them. Can you tell me where you lived before? Name a town or a village, a specific landmark, or a local specialty."

"Do you plan to find her family only with those clues? She wasn't born in a big city where each street and alley has its own name and where people in the same community knew each other!"

Scroll did not reply to Azima but instead gently pushed her hair behind her ear. She looked on at that witch encouragingly like a teacher patiently waiting for an answer from her student in the class.

"My village... didn't have a name," after hesitating for quite a while, the witch answered in a low voice. "There were no other villages nearby, and it was very far from Valencia, so far that if you want to sell wheat, you would have to sell them to a merchant traveling there at a meager price. This isn't official, but some people call the village 'Sixteen.'"

"Six...teen?" Wendy echoed involuntarily.

"Because when they returned from Valencia, it's the sixteenth village that they would pass by."

Scroll closed her eyes and asked slowly, "Let me see... There's a branch of Sanwan River winding behind that village, right?"

"There're numerous branches of Sanwan River in the Eastern Region." Azima grunted. "How can a village survive without a river to irrigate their farmlands?"

"But that branch is different." Scroll waved her hand. "It isn't wide nor deep enough for boats to pass, and even the riverbed would show in a dry season. That's why the villages nearby can't transport food and supplies by ship. But the branch converges into

a huge lake at the sixteenth village, which will never dry up even if the river water dried up. Because of this, the wheat in the village always grows better than those in others. Am I right?"

The witch's eyes were wide open. "Have you been there?"

"I heard from somebody else," Scroll answered after a short silence. "The one who told me this is currently in Neverwinter, but he wasn't a resident of the Sixteenth Village."

"What do you mean?"

"You should ask him yourself." Scroll turned to the City Hall clerk responsible for the registration. "Bring Watt here. His ID number is 0024578, and he's a furnace worker. He should be recycling slags in Zone 2 at the North Slope right now."

"Yes, Ms. Scroll." The clerk left to carry out her order.

Half an hour later, the clerk and a ruddy man showed up in the residential area.

"I don't know him..." The witch studied him and shook her head, denying their acquaintance.

"What else do you have to say now?" Azima sneered. "There're so many people in the whole Eastern Region. How can you just randomly pick one..."

"Ah, are... are you Tillan's daughter?" The big man blurted out in excitement, paying no heed to Azima. "Thank God, you're still alive and have grown into a big girl!"

The witch was stunned. "The 'Tillan' you're talking about... Is she my mother?"

"Who else could I be talking about? You've got her eyes. Especially for the mole underneath the corner of your eye, it's identical to your mother's!" Watt cried. "But you're much prettier than your mother. Hold on, you don't remember me? Well, not that it's your fault. You were just a little girl when I left the village.

When I returned, you weren't there anymore. She called you... Little Orchid back then, right? Tillan loved to call you names after beautiful flowers."

"That was just a nickname when I was little..." The witch was embarrassed. "My name is now Doris."

"I see. Well, that's a nice name, too. You know, when I dug trenches in the Sixteenth Village, people talked a lot about you. They all thought witches had abducted you, and..."

As Watt rambled on, Wendy started to figure out what had happened gradually. The big ruddy man had been a resident of a neighboring village next to the Sixteenth Village. Based on the naming rule, his village should be called the Fifteenth Village. As the two villages were geographically close to each other, he had kept in touch with his neighbors. As he envied his neighbors for their water source, he had traveled to Valencia to learn trench digging. After he learned the skills, Watt had returned to his village and encouraged some villagers to help him expand the lake toward the Fifteenth village. He had thus lived in the Sixteenth Village for quite a long time because of this project.

"Are my parents and elder brother... still living in the village?" Watt had apparently convinced Doris. After Watt finally finished, she asked hastily, "Or they've come to the Western Region with you?"

At this moment, Scroll let out a short sigh.

The sparks in the ruddy man's eyes seemed to fade out at that instant. He replied in a sorrowful tone, "They didn't make it... The second prince's army robbed our food stock. By the time we got to the king's city, starving and thirsty, a huge plague broke out. The nobles in the city shut us out, leaving us crying for help at the foot of the city wall. A large number of villagers from the nearby lands had died due to the nobles' selfishness. By the time His Majesty's rescue teams arrived, there were just a few that were still alive." He

paused for a second and said, "Your family members... weren't among them."

"No..." Doris cupped her hand over her mouth. She stood transfixed for a moment before she started to sob uncontrollably.

"I'm sorry, child." Watt instantly panicked. He wanted to comfort her but did not know what to do. In the end, he came up to the girl and patted her on the head. "Tillan called your name over and over again before she passed away. If she knew you were still alive and well, she would definitely be happy. So... don't cry anymore, girl."

Doris bit her lips fiercely and nodded slightly but cried even harder after that.

Chapter 902: An Ominous Sign

Upset with the sudden change in the situation, Azima looked to the side and stopped talking.

The crowd was silent as Doris wept and wept. After Doris had finally calmed down, Scroll spoke up again. "I believe many of you are just like her. You've constantly been on the run and never had the chance to contact your families. Even if you found an opportunity to return, you would only find a hometown in ruins. This is why we want you to provide your personal information to the City Hall. With this information, we'll be able to send each one of you the latest news about your hometown once any of your fellow townsmen come to Neverwinter. Among those people may even be your relative."

"Besides, City Hall has already sent staff to gather the refugees from all around Graycastle and to bring them back to Neverwinter. It'll be a long process, but eventually, the news will spread and more and more refugees will come to Neverwinter. It'll be easier for you to obtain information about your families if you stay here. Of course, if needed, the staff can concentrate their search on the areas around your hometowns. His Majesty is fully capable of doing that."

"Are you serious?" Azima looked up and stared at Scroll. "Are the big shots in the palace willing to help us find our families?"

"If your 'big shots' refers to City Hall officials, I'm also one of the big shots," Scroll said with her hands laid out. "We run the city with a completely different system compared to the nobles. As long as you can pass the exam, even a witch can get involved in the administration and become an official of the kingdom."

These words stirred up a commotion in the crowd.

"As for the question you asked, the answer is yes," Scroll then continued with her explanation. "Neverwinter never intended to

stop you from leaving here nor would we want to limit your freedom. But I do have to warn you against leaving Neverwinter right now. The war rages on and famine ravages the country. Numerous towns and cities were left deserted. Not only would traveling outside be very dangerous, but it would also likely be an unnecessary venture. His Majesty is currently leading the army to recover his country. When he unites Graycastle and restores order in all the four regions, you can then head out to wherever you wish."

Scroll paused and picked up the registration form again. "So, do you still think it's not necessary to fill out these forms?"

This time, no witch objected.

...

On the way back to the castle, Wendy could not help but exclaim, "You were so brilliant, Scroll. I could hardly think of what to say during that moment. They must have been quite impressed by the Witch Union."

"I just took advantage of my position," said Scroll, with a smile. "There were only 46 witches in the first batch. We'll be very busy for the next few days."

"Well..." Wendy's voice sank to a whisper.

"What? Are you going to say you aren't suitable for the position of manager again?" Scroll stopped walking. "You have to know that His Majesty chose you because—"

"Because I've some qualities that the others don't have, right?" Wendy chuckled. "Rest assured. Since the last talk I had with His Majesty, I've already made up my mind. I was just thinking about how to welcome the arriving witches. Back then, I never thought twice about accompanying my sisters to find the holy mountain no matter how harsh the journey got. Things are much better now, and if I keep saying such nonsense, I would truly feel unworthy of

the Chaos Drinks that I stole from Nightingale."

"Now that's more like it." Scroll said, relieved. "I almost forgot about the drinks until you mentioned them just now. I helped you a lot back there. Are you not going to buy me a drink for it?"

"How about tonight? I'll ask the kitchen to prepare some toasted mushrooms and fish fillets. Let's drink and hang out in my room, just like what we did the last time. If there aren't enough Chaos Drinks, we can borrow some from Nightingale. After all, she isn't here in the city right now; I can make it up to her later."

"That's settled then," Scroll said smilingly.

"By the way," Wendy examined Scroll's forehead with a curious look. "Do you really remember all the personal information of more than 100,000 citizens? Don't you get confused by all that information?"

"I don't know how to describe it." Scroll pondered for a moment. "At the beginning, when I wanted to remember something, I had to recall it from the bottom of my memory. For example, if I wanted to look for a name, I needed to recall the date when this person registered and then the exact page in the registration book. It was very troublesome, and I would get a headache whenever I overthought. However, I found that the contents of my memory became more organized over time."

"What does that mean?"

"It's as if all the details are sorted through automatically... and as soon as I start to recall something, I'll see all the relevant stuff right away." Scroll paused for a minute and appeared to be weighing her words. "And the strange thing is that I can read a lot of the related items at the same time, in detail. Maybe this is what they mean by practice makes perfect."

"I see," said Wendy, greatly impressed. "His Majesty once said that a person's memory was far more powerful than we could

imagine. I found it unbelievable at that time, but now I believe that it's no exaggeration."

"Indeed, it's a wonderful feeling," Scroll nodded and said. "Now, whenever I begin to search inside my head, I'll feel omniscient. But I'm not sure whether I'm going to be able to remember everything after His Majesty unifies Graycastle and extends his new management system to all the domains."

Wendy was thrilled by this idea and thought, "What does that mean? So if Scroll is still able to remember everything at that time, then all the people's life stories will be kept in her head.

That means she'll be history itself."

When Wendy was about to say something, sounds of hurried footsteps came from behind them.

"Lady Wendy, I finally find you," a young City Hall clerk bowed to the two witches and said. "There's a guy who came to the hall and refused to leave. He insisted on meeting the head of the Witch Union. We've told him that we'd pass on his message, but he said that he has something he must tell you face to face."

"Why did he come? What's his name?" Scroll knitted her eyebrows and asked.

"His name was Posack," answered the clerk. "He told us the reason, but we think he might be mistaken. He said that he'd found a girl covered in blood when he was tending to the cattle. He thinks that she's a witch, but the girl was unconscious, so she couldn't respond to his questions. We've checked the work plan for today and didn't find any witch scheduled to work out of town. Do you have any idea as to what this might be about?"

"Posack, he's a local man and has a good record. He's even among the first batch of students of the Agriculture class. I believe he doesn't mean to make trouble for the City Hall." Scroll was puzzled and asked, "Might the witch be Leaf?"

"That's impossible. Under the protection of the Heart of Forest, no one can hurt her." Wendy immediately denied Scroll's guess. Roland had decreed that all the new domains he seized this year should be sowed with Golden Twos. To fulfill this goal in time, he had asked Leaf to stay in the Misty Forest to continue cultivating the seeds instead of going to battle with the First Army. "If some enemies were to break into the region of the Misty Forest that she controlled, we would have heard something about it. Don't forget that there are a group of workers responsible for carrying wheat seeds and also border guards monitoring the northern side of Neverwinter. If there was an attack, we should have heard the alarm by now."

"So then he must be mistaken?"

"Anyways, let's meet the man first. We can still help the heavily wounded girl even if she's not a witch." With that being said, Wendy felt a hint of anxiety in her heart.

Am I forgetting something?

Chapter 903: "The Demons Are Coming"

In the city hall, the man named Posack was brought before Wendy and Scroll.

He was approximately 40 years old and looked like a typical farmer: swarthy and burly. There was still some dry mud and grassroots stuck onto his trousers.

"I, I know you..." The man rubbed his wrinkled hands and looked a little nervous. He bowed to Scroll and said, "You're the minister. My daughter learns how to read and write in your school. She's a really slow learner. I sincerely hope that you can bear with her faults."

"Don't be nervous," Scroll laughed and patted his shoulder. "I used to catch fish for living before I came here, but my harvest wasn't as steady as yours since the sea was too unpredictable. Furthermore, when it came to something like knowledge, it's never about a learner's background. No matter how clumsy the learner is, he or she will master the knowledge eventually given enough effort and time. Don't worry; your daughter will be able to graduate without issues."

Hearing that, Posack relaxed a lot and grinned. "I've given up my work on the farm for grazing in recent two years because His Majesty said the salary for the new industry will be higher." With these words, he bowed to Wendy. "You must be the manager of the Witch Union. I thought I didn't have the chance to meet you today."

Although Wendy was not as influential as Scroll among the ordinary people, she was still the head of the Witch Union, and thus had to make appearances at various major events. That combined with her bright red hair and thick body, it was not at all surprising for people to recognize Wendy. "Call me Wendy. I heard that you claimed to have found a heavily wounded girl who was

covered with blood. What makes you think that she's a witch?"

"Because... an ordinary person can't have animals' body parts, right?" Posack scratched his head. "At first, I thought it was a rag smeared with blood and planned to tear it down and throw it away, but this thing turned out to be connected to a girl. I took a second look and found that it was actually an animal tail!"

An animal... tail?

Wendy felt her heart skip a beat!

She suddenly recalled that a strange witch had come to Neverwinter more than two months ago, but she only knew her from Nightingale's description since this peculiar girl did not join the Witch Union or have any intimate contact with the sisters. She had a wolf's ears and a long tail, but surprisingly, His Majesty had praised that this weird half-animal was very pretty. Wendy now remembered about this strange incident that had repeatedly been mentioned by Nightingale.

That strange witch is called Lorgar, and she's a princess of a tribe in the Southernmost Region.

Could she be the girl Posack found?

"Where's she?" Wendy urgently asked. "Take us to her right now!"

...

The farmer had not taken the injured girl home. He had left her in a temporary rest shed in the pastoral area.

Seeing the Wolf Girl in bloodstained clothes lying motionlessly on the bench, Wendy's heart sank to the bottom.

From the girl's currently disfigured and bloody ears, she was sure that this girl was Lorgar and wondered what in the world had happened to her.

It was not an exaggeration to say that she was drenched in blood.

Evidently, the wolf girl got herself injured more than just a few days ago. In some parts of her body, the blood had already dried up and turned into dark brown stains, while in some other parts, the blood was still dripping out of her wounds. They could not see her injuries directly for she was wrapped in bandages from head to toe, but anyone could easily tell that she was seriously hurt.

"My lady, she's a witch... isn't she?" Posack asked.

Wendy was too stunned to say anything, so Scroll replied, "Yes, she's a witch. Your first-aid was done very nicely."

"It's great to know that. His Majesty has said in an announcement that we're obliged to inform the City Hall if we were to find a witch." Posack heaved a sigh of relief, but soon he expressed his worry. "Can she... still be saved?"

Hearing this sentence, Wendy awoke with a start. She answered in a deep voice, "I don't know, but we'll try our best. Scroll, please help me take care of her. I'll go to meet Her Highness Tilly!"

"Okay, leave her to me."

Neither Nana nor Lily was in the city, and Leaf's herbal medicine could only heal some minor injuries. Right now, receiving injuries this severe was no different from getting a death sentence.

Fortunately, the first batch of witches from the Sleeping Island had just arrived at Neverwinter. Wendy thought that if that witch was here, she might be able to save the Wolf Girl!

With that in her mind, she ran even faster.

Every second counts.

Although Lorgar was not an official member of the Witch Union, Wendy felt that the Wolf Girl was already somewhat related to the union because this girl must have received some divine guidance and thus came to this city.

Wendy did not want to lose a sister again.

...

Three days later, Wendy walked into a bedroom carrying a basin of hot water that gave off a strong smell of medicine.

"How's her condition?"

"She's still alive, but other than that..." Ashes shook her head. "Such serious injuries are way beyond what can be handled by her self-healing capacity, and it was a miracle that she even made it to the city. If she had not been that strong-willed, she would have died in the wilderness without anyone knowing about it."

When it came to treating wounds in the emergency, the Extraordinary was the most experienced one and thus took over taking care of the injured girl. She stripped off the Wolf Girl's bloodstained clothes for a general check-up. When the bandage was removed, all the witches were shocked by the injuries all over her body. Some cuts were so deep that one could see her bones. Cleaning her wounds alone cost them almost half a day.

"But you don't have to worry too much." Ashes pointed to Nightfall who was lying in a bed nearby. "Don't you notice that she looks a lot better than yesterday?"

"Do I?" Nightfall asked in a weak voice. "How come I don't feel any better?"

"You'll have steamed chicken, fried eggs, salt-roasted Bird Beak Mushrooms, and a bottle of Chaos Drink for dinner tonight," Ashes smirked and said. "So, how are you feeling now?"

Nightfall's mouth watered. "Well... Actually, I think I'm feeling better now."

"That's great, see?"

Wendy breathed a sigh of relief and nodded to Nightfall. "Thanks a lot for helping us."

"My pleasure," Nightfall forced a smile. "You guys helped Iffy."

That means you've helped us. Now, please just don't let this girl die, otherwise I..."

"We won't. You can rest assured."

Nightfall was the person Wendy had thought of earlier. This witch of the former Bloodfang Association had an incredible ability called Symbiosis. She could connect her own life to another one's by planting her magic seed in the person who would then become her Symbiont. Through this connection, she could share the Symbiont's pains and sufferings and thus helped the person recover faster. More importantly, half of the nutrition she got during a Symbiosis period could be absorbed by her Symbiont. Given that, this ability was currently their best option to keep a near-death person from dying.

Roland had been unconscious and unable to drink or eat anything for months after the Battle of Souls against Zero, and the only reason he was still alive was due to Nightfall's help.

But of course, Nightfall was not the only one who came to help the Wolf Girl.

Her Highness Tilly had sent another witch called Pandora, the primary healer for the Sleeping Island witches, to stop Lorgar's internal and external bleeding, which had significantly reduced the pressure on the symbiosis. Pandora's ability had been proved to be very helpful during their campaign to crush the rebellious action of the Bloodfang Association. Leaf's herbal medicine also helped to keep the wounds from worsening. The Cleansing Water, which was stored in the castle's basement together with the ice blocks in case of an emergency, prevented any infection from getting out of hand.

Everyone did their best to help.

However, whether Lorgar could come back to life still depended on her willpower. Three days ago, they had sent Animal Messengers to the Northern Region. In the following days, they

would have a difficult time waiting for information.

Suddenly, Lorgar's finger flinched when Wendy was about to wipe her body.

At first, Wendy was dumbfounded and believed that it might just be an illusion, but then she saw the Wolf Girl's lips tremble slightly.

"..."

Lorgar appeared to be whispering something, but her voice was so feeble that her words were indistinguishable.

Wendy's heart raced uncontrollably. She forced herself to calm down before she quickly bent forward and placed her ear close to Lorgar's mouth.

This time, she was able to make out the girl's faint words.

"Demons..."

She repeated the word.

"The demons are coming."

Chapter 904: Battle Alert (First Half)

Vader would go out and patrol every time dusk came.

Most of the time, he would circle Neverwinter with two or three of his subordinates. But sometimes, he would choose to head out alone—in theory, he was already the chief of the police department and the third most authoritative person within the kingdom's Security Bureau, so he didn't need to do any patrols personally. But he continued to do so as he preferred to get himself involved in the field rather than doing paperwork in the office.

He had already been in Neverwinter for a year and a half, and there were two things here that impressed him the most. The first was the exponential rate at which the city was expanding. It took him only half an hour to walk around Border Town when he first arrived, but now it would take him at least three times as long just to circle the city. That's not even including the harbor to the South and the farmlands to the east.

Secondly, the law and order of Neverwinter could only be described as amazing. The most common crimes were theft and brawl, but they were also the most serious ones. Crimes such as homicide, robbery, kidnapping rarely happened. The security of Neverwinter had deteriorated before when there was a massive influx of refugees, but with the combined efforts of the police department and the Witch Union, the troublemakers were swiftly dealt with.

His Majesty's promise on solving every single crime was not a bluff. In the face of Summer's retrospective ability and Vanilla's tracking ability, no criminal was able to escape the law. Due to the high risk and cost of crime, coupled with zero tolerance for Black Street Rats, Neverwinter's public security was able to experience a visible improvement.

He insisted on his daily patrols as he wanted to feel this peace—

he would feel an immense sense of pride and satisfaction whenever he saw the carefree passersby strolling around late at night and seeing the trusting look on their faces as they saluted to him.

He was surprised himself that he could turn out to become a law enforcer respected by all instead of ending up a street thug that was condemned by the public.

He had never experienced such a feeling when he was in the patrol team.

Both of these jobs were designed for the same purpose. Even the procedure and the tasks were similar, yet they lead to entirely different results.

The main difference would probably be the capabilities of the rulers.

"Chief, should I go with you?" he was greeted by Whistle who had just dispersed his troops outside the city hall.

"Oh? Are you not going to spend time with that lady today?"

"You... even know about that," Whistle's face suddenly began to turn red, "Well... it's not necessary to stay together every night."

Some of the passersby burst into laughter at his remark.

"Then you'd better be careful, or else she will get stolen by someone else."

"Shut... shut up!"

Vader shook his head with a smile. "I'll be fine to patrol alone today. You should finish up and head home."

"Well... in that case, thanks, Chief!"

Looking at Whistle's back as he went away excitedly, Vader became a little emotional. When he had first left Valencia, he was alone and had thought that he would spend the rest of his life in solitude. He did not expect that he would be able to accomplish so much in his life. He started to consider finding his significant other

after buying an adjoining house for his father Cacusim and himself.

Just as Vader was about to walk out of City Hall, a shrilling alarm suddenly went off in the city.

"Woo—woo—"

His face froze.

The sound of this alarm was utterly different from the ones that were used before. It consisted of a crescendo that was in an endless repeat. It was the kind of sound that would not be forgotten when heard once—it represented the highest level of alert that was not heard even in the Months of Demons. In fact, he had only rehearsed it during a drill, so this was the first time he had actually heard the alarm blare across the city.

According to procedures, when the highest alarm sounded, Neverwinter would be placed under martial law. The city gates had to be all closed. The police would be responsible for clearing the streets, while the First Army would form a defensive perimeter.

"Cheif!" Whistle and the rest that were with him rushed out of the office.

Vader turned around and saw that the entire City Hall was at a standstill. Everyone was so overwhelmed and stunned that they were frozen stiff on the spot.

His Majesty is now leading the troops to recover the Kingdom of Graycastle, so this is definitely not a drill!

Just what exactly had happened that would make the Garrison sound this alarm?

Damn it, it just had to happen now when Neverwinter is at its most vulnerable!

He gritted his teeth and shouted, "Stop standing there! Hurry up and get into action! Whistle, recall everyone that's on vacation!

Firehead, take the rest and follow me to the wall! Do what you did when we carried out the exercise. Do you understand?"

Vader's thunderous voice not only awakened the police members from their daze, but it also shook the city hall officials into action.

"Yes, I understand!"

The City Hall became busy instantly, but Vader was in no mood to bother about those officials. He rushed out of the castle area with a group of police.

When he saw the confused residents on the street, Vader felt completely stressed out.

Since this alarm system was only put into practice after the new year, it had not even gone through a citywide drill. Perhaps His Majesty did not expect such an emergency to happen so soon. But now that it did, it can only be considered as a careless mistake by the Garrison. If the decision were up to him, he would have sounded the regular alarm bell at the same time, as to evacuate the people wandering on the streets.

But anyways, now was not the time to complain. Vader clapped his hands and made the surrounding residents focus their attention on him. "Everyone listen up! Go home right now and stay indoors! This is an alarm of an enemy attack. I repeat! Everyone go back home now!"

"Go home immediately and don't stay here!" Firehead and the rest also started to follow his example and shouted out to warn everyone.

Fortunately, the police department had the trust of the residents. Coupled with the fact that the administrative department had also gone through multiple drills with the routine alarms, everyone started to move to the residential quarters after hearing the warnings.

In this manner, a group of people started to shout as they ran

towards the city wall.

The soldiers were everywhere on top of the city wall, and flags were flapping widely against the setting sun. The artilleries on the platform were readied and aimed towards the vast grassland in front, waiting to fire as soon as they see any slight movement. Witnessing this scene, Vader was able to calm down a little.

As long as the First Army was around, no army can breach through this invincible defense line.

This was a point proven battle after battle.

The police quickly committed themselves to on-site security and ensured a minimal level of order... But Vader was puzzled as to why while the highest level of alarm was sounding, the grasslands and jungles of the Western Region remained motionless.

Where are the enemy?

In the meantime, another group of people started quarreling in one of the meeting rooms at the Lord's castle.

"Because of an unknown witch's mumbling, you triggered the alarm of the highest level?" Barov looked at Wendy with an expression of disbelief. "Do you know how much trouble and loss this will cause us? We don't even know whether this woman named Lorgar can be trusted. And if I'm not mistaken, your only evidence is her sleep-talk! It's ridiculous to shut down half of Neverwinter only based on this! How do you expect me to explain this to His Majesty if we end up not being able to accomplish our previously assigned tasks?"

Chapter 905: Battle Alert (Second Half)

According to His Majesty Roland's plan, the City Hall, the Security Bureau, the First Army, and the Witch Union were the four major organizations that constituted the administrative body of Graycastle. Except for the Security Bureau, for the other three organizations to take action, they would first have to get approval and support from the other departments.

This set of rules was initially made to utilize the full potential of the kingdom. When His Majesty was around, hardly anything would go wrong. However, the problems would usually arise whenever when His Majesty was absent from Neverwinter; it was difficult for the three parties to reach consensus on any given topic in a short time. Hence, when Wendy heard "demons are coming," she thought the best course of action would be to sound the alarm first and ensure the safety of Neverwinter before going through the process of holding a meeting.

It wasn't as if she didn't know how much trouble this would cause for the City Hall. There were wheat fields in the Misty Forest that produced hundreds of bags of Golden Two seeds every day. Those seeds need to be transported to the docks by workers before they can be shipped to the Northern Region, the Southern Territory and the other newly conquered territories of His Majesty. Also, the supply of timber, mushrooms, and fruits from the forests would be negatively affected. The livestock farming in the grassland pastures would also be stalled. Barov's scolding was not entirely uncalled for.

Originally, the plan was to build a new city wall before the third Battle of Divine Will. This new wall would cover the north side of the City and encompass half of the grassland. They would form multiple layers of defense together with the existing walls, thus effectively improving the defense line of the Impassable Mountain Range. The ore smelting area and factory in the north of the city

would then be much safer. The flow of resources from the forests and the North Slope Mine would not be cut off even after battle commences.

But this plan was after all still, a plan. No one expected that news of the demons would come so soon. Compared with the financial and trade losses, Wendy made this decision out of caution.

"Are the demons not a good enough reason, mortal?" The curtains hanging down the walls of the conference room started to sway as El's voice resounded in everyone's mind. "You cannot slack at all when dealing with the demons. They're no foolish demonic beasts. They won't wait for you to prepare before attacking—I don't think you're aware of how terrifying our enemy is. That's a real pity. After witnessing your King's brilliance, I thought you common people have made significant progress over the past few hundred years."

As an ally in the fight against the demons, Taquila survivors and members of the Sleeping Spell naturally had the right to attend the meeting. Both Pasha and Tilly expressed their approval regarding Wendy's decision to sound the alarm of the highest level.

Barov was so angry that he nearly laughed out of frustration. "Yes. It is true that I do not know how scary these demons are because I've never actually seen them myself. But are you saying that these guys can launch an attack out of thin air? You kept mentioning how we have to be well prepared for their attack, and that I agree with. However, the problem is that we can't even spot the enemy's shadow right now! There's the witch controlled Misty Forest to our west and the Watchtowers on the Impassable Mountain Range to our east. Between the two is a flat, coverless grassland. Any movements made by the enemy will be seen from miles away. Do we have to be even more cautious?"

It was clear that the City Hall Director was wholeheartedly devoted to Neverwinter's expansion tasks that were entrusted to him by His Majesty himself. Wendy remembered that at the last

meeting, Barov dared not even breathe loudly in front of the monstrous original carrier, yet now he even rebutted her directly. Not to mention the obvious sarcasm in his voice.

"I think it's necessary," said Ashes. "In fact, I was the one who suggested the idea to Wendy."

"And what's your reason? Is it still because of the mumbo-jumbo of a half-asleep witch that came from who knows where?" Barov slammed his palm on the table. "Don't tell me that you believe her. If her words can actually be trusted, or if your relationship is that close, then why isn't she a member of the Witch Union yet?"

"That's not the reason. I judged the situation based on facts," Ashes explained calmly, "I have fought with her before, and I am aware of her capability. If it were just one or two hybrid demonic beasts, she wouldn't have ended up in such a dire situation. According to what we know, a Mad Demon without the support of the Demon Stone is about the same with a demonic hybrid in terms of combat prowess. Furthermore, even if Lorgar couldn't overpower them in a confrontation, she could have simply just turned into a wolf and escaped."

"What exactly are you trying to say?"

"She most likely ran into more than ten demons. There must have also been a flying Devilbeast that could track her from the air that caused her to be so severely injured." Ashes said matter-of-factly, "Besides, we also found a map on her. If we are not mistaken, the characters on it were written there by Lightning. Although we don't know the details of her trip, one thing was certain: She had ventured out into the wasteland after she left Neverwinter. If there were suddenly so many demons in the Barbarian Land, then we'd better start preparing to deal with whatever they are planning."

"I also agree with this judgment." Pasha's voice was much softer than El's. "Distance means nothing to the Devilbeast. If they really

wanted to attack Neverwinter, the news of their attack might still be on their way from the watchtowers when the Devilbeast has already landed in the city."

"Not to mention that most people don't even know about the demons. If the enemy were to just drop into the city without any preparation on our side, the result would be catastrophic." Tilly added and said, "The alarm would at least give people the time to go back to their homes home and hide. This allows us to control the panic to a certain extent."

"Uh, but..." Barov was at a loss for words.

To him, compared to the first few people who voiced their opinions, the words of Princess Tilly certainly held more weight. It was not because she was the leader of the Sleeping Island witches, but it was due to her being part of the Wimbledon family. As she was a member of the royal family and the sister of the ruling king, the City Hall Director naturally had second thoughts about blatantly refuting her words.

He turned toward the head of the First Army garrison, who was a quiet, middle-aged hunter, trying to pull someone to his side. But the man remained silent and just stared straight ahead as if he was not paying any attention to the argument.

Seeing the atmosphere tense up, Wendy took a deep breath and stood up. "I've already sent the message to the Northern Region, so His Majesty should be informed about Neverwinter's current situation and issue countermeasures soon. Lorgar could also wake up any moment now. So I hope the Director can stop worrying so much—as long as we gain a clearer picture of what's happening, we can easily call off the martial law. But before that, everyone should still be more cautious." She paused and said, "As for the tasks set out by His Majesty beforehand, we can make it up through other means."

Barov frowned and asked, "Such as?"

"We might be able to use the devouring worm to transport the wheat. All the Neverwinter workers would have to do to is transport the wheat from the Misty Forest to the Third Border City." Wendy looked at the Taquila survivors in the light curtain and said, "This way, the wheat can still be loaded onto the transport ships even without having the workers leave the perimeter of the city."

"What?" El was displeased and said, "We're soldiers, not porters."

"But as allies, this is something we can do." Pasha stretched out her tentacles and curled them around El's body—although El did not appear to have a mouth at all.

Wendy nodded thankfully and said, "Livestock can be transferred in the same way, and since Honey has a lot of control over animals, we don't have to worry about them being scared by Fran. The Western Region has an abundance of grasslands, and the lands along the shores of the Redwater River can be used as temporary pastures."

Barov's expression still did not look satisfied, but his frown had loosened up a bit.

"I know these measures can't completely erase the damage caused by imposing martial law, but right now, Neverwinter's safety is our utmost priority." Wendy knew perfectly well that it would not be enough to rely on tenderness if she did not want to let His Majesty down and carry out her role as head of the Witch Union... She must step up and become a person that people can rely on. "If there are any losses caused by this decision, I'm willing to take full responsibility!"

Chapter 906: Unveiling The Mystery (Part I)

In the following week, the atmosphere within the castle was incredibly tense. Hour-long meetings were held every day, during which all the ministers from each department would come to report and discuss the current situation.

"So? Are you still unable to find a trace of the demons?" Barov sipped his tea as he glanced at the people around the table.

He looked much more relaxed than he had been a couple of days ago. Wendy's promise to take full responsibility for her action seemed to have lifted a heavy burden off his mind. Either that or the smooth implementation of the plan for transporting the Golden Twos likely relieved some of his stress.

"The first army's lookouts have already expanded their surveillance range to the edge of the grassland, but they still couldn't find anything," the garrison leader replied concisely." Further north lies the Barbarian Land which is covered by a dense forest. Without sufficient supplies, it would be tough to expand our perimeter any further."

"And that's all you can do, common people. You'll probably die to the insects living in the forests before you even get a chance to see the demons." Alethea seemed keen on scoffing at the people of Neverwinter at every chance she got. "Just leave it to us. A team of ten God's Punishment Witches has already gone 15km into the Fertile Plains and set up a small outpost at the Pearl Lake."

"The Pearl Lake?" Wendy asked.

"It's marked with a lot of bird's nest on the Wolf Girl's map. The place was once full of lakes and springs, but now most of it has already turned into a swamp."

"There shouldn't be any dangers, right?"

"Rest assured. When it comes to fighting demons, we're far more

experienced than you people. Any God's Punishment Witch can deal with three to four Mad Demons at the same time. With five witches as a team, they would have no problem wiping out a small demon patrol," Alethea said confidently. "Of course, if the Wolf Girl did run into a patrol team, then I'm afraid that the enemy's main force is most likely already closing in on us."

"Are they incapable of acting alone?" Barov asked out of curiosity.

"Due to their reliance on the Red Mist, it's impossible for the demons to stray too far away from their supply line," Pasha explained. "After all, demons can't move around freely like human beings who only need to breathe in air."

"Well then... As the enemy is still quite far away from Neverwinter, why can't we call off the alert now?"

"Unless we can set up a web of sentry posts around Neverwinter, we won't be able to fully eliminate the possibility of the enemy sneaking into the city."

"But even then, the sentry posts would mean little to us," another Senior Witch added. "Without enough Sigils of Listening, the sentries won't have enough time to send back the warning even if they were to catch sight of the Devilbeasts."

The extreme environment of the Barbarian Land formed an invisible barrier which barred any news from going through in time. It was as if a layer of mist shrouded the whole area to the Northwest of Neverwinter, and all they could do was to search for tiny clues in the wilderness. When Wendy realized this fact, she could not help but sigh in her heart.

Lorgar's news truly came at a bad time.

If His Majesty had not left for the expedition, it would have taken only a day or two for Sylvie, Lightning, Maggie, and Nightingale to scout out the current situation of the entire Northern side of the

Impassable Mountain Range.

My own ability isn't particularly helpful in this kind of situation.

Suddenly, Tilly asked, "Mr. Director, you may feel that I'm being nosy, but could you please tell me how the people of the city has reacted to the situation these past few days? Were they scared or panicked?"

"That will be my pleasure, Your Highness." Barov hastened to put down his teacup and bow to Princess Tilly with a hand on his chest. "Everything in the city is within the control of City Hall. Recently, our clerks have received lots of inquiries, but most people just want to know where the enemy is and whether the First Army needs help. So the news has heightened our people's morale rather than stressing them out, even the productivity of the night shift has significantly improved. Please rest assured. No one blames the Sleeping Island witches for the coming demons."

"Well... That's good then."

"Of course, we've also received some complaints about the price increases for Bird Beak Mushrooms and pinecones." City Hall Director eyed Wendy blankly. "If we don't cancel the alert in time, the prices of eggs will also begin to skyrocket"

"Let's put aside those matters for now. I think we need to raise the awareness about demons as soon as possible. Since the demons are completely different from all our previous enemies," Tilly said worriedly. "If someone takes this chance to stir up troubles and stigmatizes the witches as Devil's minions again, the trust between the common people and the witches will be destroyed."

"This..." Barov hesitated. "I have to consult His Majesty about this matter."

"So let's write it down in today's report." Tilly looked at Wendy.

"Understood." Wendy nodded. When she was about to summarize all the reports today, a burst of rapid footsteps

interrupted the silence in the conference hall. They heard Ring's voice before seeing her. "La-Lady Wendy, the Wolf Girl woke up!"

"What?" Everyone stood up in surprise. Wendy could hardly wait to meet the girl and said, "I'm coming right now."

"Ahem, I'll also go to have a look—" Barov was about to follow, but Ashes stopped him.

"That's a girl's bedroom you're talking about. I think it would be better if you just stayed here and waited for our news."

...

The moment Wendy entered the room, she saw that Lorgar was struggling to get up from the bed, and beads of sweat were welling up on her forehead. She looked pale. Her broken ears drooped, and her hair seemed dry and dull.

"I can't believe it... I'm still alive." She panted and then turned her head to look at the crowd pouring into the room. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"Ten days have passed since we found you." Wendy gently pressed her back into the bed. "Don't move. Your limbs, bones, and even inner organs have suffered severe injuries. Ten days isn't enough for them to recover. You survive these days because of Nightfall's Seed of Symbiosis, but you still ought to stay in bed and rest before Nana comes back."

After knowing the use of Seed of Symbiosis, Lorgar slightly inclined her head to greet Nightfall who was lying in a bed nearby and said, "Thank you."

"That's alright." Nightfall shrugged her shoulders, trying to appear casual. "And I think it's quite good to be able to lie in bed and have Chaos Drinks every day."

"What exactly did you meet in the depths of the Barbarian Land?" Ashes asked in a deep voice. "You've mentioned demons many times in your sleep."

"Yes, I did encounter demons... many of them." Lorgar closed her eyes to recall what had happened. "At first, I met two demons by themselves when I was chasing a hybrid demonic beast. They might've been scouts, or perhaps they were just out hunting for some demonic beasts." She took a deep breath. "I managed to kill them both, but I never expected that these two demons are but droplets in the vast ocean when compared to the army of demons that I spotted soon after. Countless demons swarmed the Taquila ruins, and among them were several colossal monsters."

Hearing the Wolf Girl's description, all the people in the bedroom fell silent.

Chapter 907: Unveiling The Mystery (Part II)

Roland and Lightning had once told Lorgar that if an opponent was too strong for her to take on alone, it would be better to withdraw and report the news back to Neverwinter as soon as possible. Lorgar always kept this in mind. When she discovered the demon army, she decided to return to the Neverwinter immediately.

After all, she had already proven herself in her previous battles, and she knew that she would have plenty more chances to fight against these demons once they invaded Neverwinter.

Despite having made that decision, Lorgar did not leave the vicinity immediately and instead decided to scout out the movements of the demons from a higher vantage point. She did not want to embarrass herself by telling everyone in the city that she fled at the sight of the demon army. Lorgar thought that if she were able to bring back more information about the demons, then even the great chief would owe her a huge favor.

All this time, she had been trying to prove herself and gain the great chief's recognition rather than his apology. It did not matter whether his words that day were out of genuine concern or just mockery. Simply put, for the Wolf Girl, this was about her honor. But for the entire Wildflame clan, this would significantly improve their status in the great chief's heart.

That was why she chose to stay in this dangerous place.

Of course, she would never tell the witches what went through her mind as she did this. She would simply tell them that she was just curious.

She began to describe her experience to the witches. "I quickly found an abandoned stone tower that was covered by moss and

vines near the ruins of Taquila. Half of the tower had already crumbled down, but it was still the best spot in the area for me as a vantage point."

"To be able to transform and run away any minute in case of an emergency, I took off my clothes and stored them in my backpack. I wrapped myself in a cloak and climbed up to the top of the tower."

"As I reached the top, I happened to find an opening in the tower walls that was covered by vines. This was a perfect hiding spot for me, as many Devilbeasts flew over my position without spotting me."

"Only then, I was finally able to get a clear picture of the massive beasts."

"Those are actually not living creatures!"

"They're not... alive?" Much surprised, Wendy could not help but interrupt.

"I think so," Lorgar said in a low voice. "Those monsters didn't seem to have any characteristics of a living creature. They were more like..."

"Like what?"

"Like the iron bridge that your people built over the Redwater River."

The witches looked at each other in bewilderment. "A bridge?"

"I also couldn't believe it back then, but that's how they look like." Lorgar coughed twice weakly. "Those monsters had straight backs which looked like the deck of a bridge. On either side of its torso, there were two long legs which resemble the pillars that support the bridge. However... neither its torso nor its limbs were covered by flesh. I was able to see right through its body with the empty gaps between its bones and metal pieces."

Wendy gasped in fright.

A walking steel bridge? Is this a new invention of the demons?

After resting for a short while, Lorgar continued, "Each skeleton monster is nearly 30 meters tall with many demons secured to the top of it. From a distance, it looked as if insect eggs covered its surface. A huge sack hanged on one side of its abdomen, and it looked like some inner organ that had fallen out of its body. I could see it pulsating with a dark red mist surging under the skin." She clenched her fist and then gently placed it on her chest. "By the name of Three Gods, those monsters looked like evil incarnate."

Ashes frowned, "... and then?"

"These monsters laid down by the ruins, and hundreds of tubes came out of the sack and inserted themselves into the ground. Within seconds, all the soil surrounding them turned into dark brown clods and the weeds and trees around withered, as if life was somehow drained out of them. After that, most of the demons sank into the ground, leaving only a couple hundred of Mad Demons and a dozen of Devilbeasts in the ruins. I guess they were responsible for some scouting or patrolling tasks."

"Have you ever seen a demon which has countless eyes and tentacles? It usually stays at a higher place; it looks like a wiggling blob at first glance." Wendy asked while noting down the Wolf Girl's description.

"Do you mean a Multi-eyed Demon?" Lorgar shook her head. "Lightning mentioned this dangerous monster to me, but I didn't find anything like it in the Army of Demons."

"So how did you get hurt?"

"I underestimated the enemies." Lorgar looked a little depressed. "I hid at the top of the tower for three days. Many Devilbeasts flew across this area during this period, but it seemed that none of them were seriously patrolling the place. When I heard a Mad Demon

blowing a horn, I thought it wouldn't attract the attention of the main force, but when I started to run away, I found that several squads of demons had already been lying in wait nearby for me."

"Wait... Do you mean they ambushed you?" Nightfall asked, surprised. "How come the demons were able to make this kind of arrangement? You guys said before that they were nothing but strong, simple-minded beasts?"

"The demons from the lowest rank are indeed stupid beasts, but once they get a commander, the situation will be different," Tilly said in a low voice. "There must have been a senior demon among the enemies that besieged Lorgar."

"In the face of an unknown enemy, no one can come up with a perfect battle tactic," Ashes patted the Wolf Girl's shoulder. "You were able to escape from such a formidable enemy and return to Neverwinter alive. That in itself is already an impressive achievement."

This was the first time Wendy had heard such a compliment from the Extraordinary.

"Maybe. Fortunately... the senior demon didn't come to capture me personally." Lorgar forced a weak smile. "Immediately after I knew that I was spotted, I transformed into a wolf and tried to escape under the cover of the night. During the pursuit, their spear throwers were unable to hit me in the darkness. I don't know how many enemies were after me at that time, but some Devilbeasts were always hovering over my position."

"You, You killed all the demons chasing you?" Tilly asked confusedly.

Hearing that, Wendy also began to wonder. If Lorgar couldn't get rid of the enemies besieging her, she would remain in a passive position under attack. The fact that she had suffered severe injuries also proved this point. It seems that she was in quite a desperate situation.

"No... they gave up hunting me," Lorgar replied. "I don't understand why... If they had chosen to run after me for another day, I would have died from exhaustion. But surprisingly, they all just suddenly withdrew."

"Red Mist!" Tilly quickly responded. "They must have been afraid of wastefully using up the Red Mist that they brought with them. Do you remember the place where they started to retreat?"

Lorgar thought for a moment while rubbing her forehead. "It's probably about 2,500 or 3,000 meters away from the grassland."

"Where's the map? Give me a map quickly."

Seeing Tilly measuring distances on a map, Wendy gradually realized what the skeleton monsters mentioned by Lorgar might be. She thought of the church's Siege Beasts and guessed that the skeleton monsters were possibly also some machine driven by magic power, which was used to transport Red Mist. If that was the case, everything in Lorgar's description would make sense. The demons sinking into the ground and the soil polluted by Red Mist was just like the scene in the Devil's Town behind the snow mountain.

"According to Lorgar's report, the Devilbeasts that set out from the Taquila ruins could only make it to the edge of the Barbarian Land. Does this mean that Neverwinter is still safe?" Wendy wondered.

After recounting her experience to the witches, Lorgar was exhausted and some blood began to leak out of her wounds and had stained her bandage once more.

Seeing this, Wendy comforted the Wolf Girl and asked her to take some rest before Nana's return. After that, she led the witches out of the bedroom and gently closed the door behind them.

Chapter 908: A Bloody Road

Back in the meeting room, Wendy read out the newly acquired intelligence from the beginning. However, El rudely interrupted her when she started to talk about the safety measures.

"There is no such thing as a safe distance when it comes to the demons—Taquila paid a heavy price before realizing this, and it would be extremely risky to use the Red Mist's consumption area to plan for the war zone. For instance, Devilbeasts are capable of carrying multiple gas tanks, thus extending their attack range, Or they could bury a batch of gas tanks in advance and then replace them as they marched. Naturally, the most direct measure would be to build outposts and use them as links to extend the attacking range. Fighting to gain control of these outposts will be crucial in the Battle of Divine Will. Unfortunately, it will be tough to find all the hidden sentry posts in the vast plains. Never forget that the demons are always more cunning than you can ever comprehend."

Wendy could not help but imagine the scene El had described: the overwhelming army of demons would be launching fierce head-on attacks while at the same time setting up outposts everywhere to store their Red mist. If they succeed, the whole area would be quickly overrun by an endless horde of demons. This would have had cut off the communication and transportation of resources within the old Union's territories, which in turn would also endanger the surrounding areas. It would be like a stone rolling down a slope; the more land they lose, the harder it would be to resist the demons. In the end, they would no longer be capable of fighting back.

"In your opinion, what are the chances of them attacking Neverwinter city?" Tilly asked calmly.

"I must say that you are fortunate—or rather we are all very fortunate," El said while stretching her tentacles. "even though we can't use the Red mist to determine the enemy's attacking range, at

least we can determine their intentions through it. I don't think the demons are likely to launch a large-scale attack on Neverwinter city in the immediate future"

"Could you elaborate?"

"The Red mist." The ancient witch nodded its blob head, "Any movements the demons make are based on their supply of the Red Mist. The fact that they went underground and left only their patrol team above ground instead of building a camp means that there aren't enough resources for them to use. Even if there were attacks at the border, it would probably only consist of a few small skirmishes. Of course, whether or not this situation will change in the future will have to depend on whatever happens from now on."

Tilly shifted her gaze to Pasha.

"El's judgment is credible," said the latter while shaking her main tentacles. "during the days of the Union, she led a small platoon of the Blessed Army and successfully attacked the Devil's Town multiple times... but her temper is rather bad."

"My patience is only used on things that are worth worrying over," El said bluntly. "Compared to the Devilbeast's long-range sneak attacks, I'm more concerned about those new war machines."

"I would like to ask... how did the demons transport Red mist before?" Barov finally found a chance to talk.

"Pretty much in the same way we would transport our supplies," Pasha sighed, "with low-level demons, carts, enslaved demonic hybrids or transformed Siege Beasts. The time they require to prepare for war is also close to that of ours. Everytime a battle was about to start, one could see dozens of red mist supply lines running across the entire Fertile Plains."

"To stop the transportation of the Red mist, everyone including the Blessed Army, the combat witches, and the common troops

would have to go all-out. When we had to face a well-guarded Red Mist transport platoon, the blood of our soldiers would dye the whole plains red. As a result, those red mist supply lines were both the demons' and our troops' line of life-or-death." El added.

Everyone in the room was a bit startled by those words.

Even though they have not officially fought against the Demon army yet, everyone could already feel the pressure that this fierce race had put on humanity 400 years ago.

Under the guidance of His Majesty Roland, even Wendy could understand the importance of logistics. Transportation of supplies was undoubtedly a measure of an army's capability in sustaining itself. Suppose the demons did have the ability to construct such a large vehicle to transport Red mist. This would mean that they would be able to provide large quantities of supplies for the front-lines without expanding too many forces. Fewer supply lines would mean that there would be a higher concentration of troops guarding the transport teams. Perhaps the scene that Lorgar saw would become standard for the demons' inevitable march.

If it weren't for Roland Wimbleton, she really would have no idea how the third Battle of Divine Will was to be fought. It was clear that the demons have changed dramatically. There are now Senior demons who can move around independently; not to mention the appearance of the gigantic skeleton monsters. Other than Neverwinter city, the rest of the human kingdoms' strength was probably even weaker than during the Union's time. She did not even dare to imagine a scene where those noble knights would charge into the sea of demons.

"All in all, the current situation does not completely refute our previous assumptions—only the time was misjudged." Aware of the fact that overemphasizing the hardships of war was probably not good for morale, El coughed twice and changed the subject. "The BlackRock spire, which can produce Red mist, needs to be built on the God's Stone mineral veins. So it's not surprising that the

enemy chose to capture the ruins of the Holy City. After all, Taquila is now the easternmost God's Stone mining place on the Fertile Plains. Once the demons construct the spire, the range of the Red mist will directly cover the Impassable Mountain Range. At that time, any resistance will be futile."

No one could object to the fact that if the demons were no longer restricted in their movements, they would be able to launch attacks from any direction. And their flying Devilbeasts were much more flexible than the hydrogen balloon. It would be highly possible to get attacked by them if one left the city area... In a situation like this, it would be unlikely for humans to be able to resist for more than a couple years and in the end, they would be annihilated.

Though Wendy was not very familiar with the intricacies of war, she still had participated in these kinds of meetings multiple times. She knew that both His Majesty Roland and the Church of Hermes were adamant in stopping the demons' plan to occupy the Taquila ruins.

It seems like the three parties were in agreement on this point.

"Fortunately, the demons have exposed their intentions prematurely, and considering how the Bloody Moon won't appear for another 3-5 years, we can still prepare ourselves to the fullest before launching a decisive attack." El continued. "Even if we fail, the nearest Blackrock spire to the demons is in the Fertile Plains, which is hundreds of miles north of the Dragonspine Mountains. So in terms of supply lines, they don't have any advantage over us. But anyways, one thing is certain. War is now upon us."

Wendy suddenly felt that her shoulders had become a lot heavier.

"Wait, wait..." Barov suddenly shouted. "How you decide to fight the demons does not concern me. However, we can't keep the gates closed forever, right? Since we now know that the Army of Demons is still far from Neverwinter city and that they won't

attack us for the time being, shouldn't we call off the alert and get those farms back up and running?"

"I believe that Neverwinter requires a more reliable alarm system," the head of the garrison followed up, "His Majesty mentioned before that establishing a deeper defensive line would allow a higher margin of error when it came to the alarms. I was wondering if it's possible to ask Miss Lotus to construct a few Beacon Towers along the plains. Of course, it would be even better if we utilized what His Excellency Carter had mentioned: a communication tool that can connect dozens of miles instantaneously. This way, the City Hall's work wouldn't be delayed."

The first option was easy but the second required both Anna and Roland since nobody knew how to actualize it. Also, delivering news through beacons may not be necessarily faster than a Devilbeast ambush.

Wendy hesitated for a moment but before she could reply, Pasha's voice sounded in their heads.

"Leave this to us."

"Hmm? What do you plan to do?" Ashes raised her eyebrows.

"Since we already know the location of the demons' camp, it makes things a lot simpler," Pasha stretched out her tentacle and showed it in the light curtain, "through this, we can create a complete surveillance system to watch the demons, similar to a light curtain."

In her tentacle, there was a Five-Colored Stone.

Wendy immediately remembered what No. 76 Phyllis had done before. "Do you plan to use it to locate the phantom instrument?"

"Exactly, once shattered, the magic core will unfold the light curtain in the corresponding position. But the number of these magic stones are limited. Each time we use one of them their

number will decrease. At the same time, they are also essential in finding the keys of the Chosen One. Therefore, I will only be able to use it in extremely important situations."

"But—" she instantly thought of another problem, "this requires someone to get close to the Taquila ruins, correct? But the demons have already..."

"Rest assured. There is no need for you to worry. Since it's our idea, we will be the ones executing it." El said. "Taquila would never do something as cowardly as proposing a plan only to have others execute it. This is but a small matter. All God's Punishment Witches are prepared to sacrifice themselves.—"

"But it's still the best if you do not have to sacrifice yourselves," Tilly interrupted the other side with a smile. "Leave the task of placing the Magic Stone to the Sleeping Spell. Though their fighting capacity is limited, they do possess a variety of skills. Also, being the newcomers in the Western Region, they must also contribute in order to gain everyone's approval, isn't that right?"

Chapter 909: A Problem in Dreamland (Part I)

"Your Majesty... Roland?"

The voice was soft and distant.

It wasn't until Roland felt a tickling sensation around his ear that he suddenly realized someone was calling his name.

"You spaced-out again." Nightingale leaned dramatically on the long table, looking right into Roland's eyes. She held her chin in her hand, with her head slightly lopsided, and one pale index finger was swaying from side to side. It was obvious that she had used that finger to fiddle with Roland's ear.

"Um... really?" Roland cleared his throat, pretending that he was reading the statistical report that had just come in. "Probably because of the warm weather today. It makes me doze off easily."

"This isn't the first time to you started daydreaming." Nightingale walked back to the recliner on the other side of the tent. "Ever since you came back from Reflection Church, you've constantly been in a daze. Has anything happened?"

Roland was about to deny what she had said, but the words got caught in his throat. He knew Nightingale could tell lies from truth, and he could not continue to deceive himself either. Even though it had been almost a week; he still could not understand what was going on.

"I did find something wrong... But the whole thing is so creepy and weird that I don't know where to start."

"You don't have to tell me if you don't want to." Nightingale stared at the sky above, her hands behind her head. "I'm not as smart as you anyway. Even if you were to tell me, I wouldn't be of much help. Perhaps Anna would be more useful in this area..."

"I haven't told her either." Roland shook his head, forcing a smile.

"Oh... is that so?" Nightingale turned over immediately. "Why not?"

"Because it's so bizarre that I'm afraid it's beyond the scope of my understanding," Roland said flatly. "As much as I hate to admit, it doesn't affect anything. In other words, this is completely personal. Telling her wouldn't help any, it would only make her worry."

"I see." Nightingale blinked as if sudden enlightenment had struck her. Roland, however, knew she did not understand anything but just thought the whole idea cool.

"Don't tell her that I frequently daydream." Roland reminded Nightingale. "This is something nobody else can solve."

"Of course!" Nightingale's face somehow lighted up. She patted her chest, produced a slice of grilled fish from the sack and shoved it into her mouth, looking quite satisfied.

After obtaining Nightingale's promise, Roland sighed internally. The data on the statistical report did not make any sense to him, What Roland had seen in the secret chamber of the church cluttered his mind.

Why would a legendary figure appear at the early stage of the foundation of the Union? From her portrait, it seemed that she had existed even before the Union age.

Roland had later made inquiries to Isabella, Agatha, and Phyllis, but none of them had given him a definite answer. It was such a dim and distant past that nobody could tell who the person in the picture was. They could only conjecture that she had, at one time, been prominent.

Roland used to think that there were only two types of people in the Dream World. One was those defeated by Zero, whose souls

were permanently bound to the Building of Souls but who still more or less maintained a feeble connection with the real world. The most typical features of them were the astonishing resemblance of their physical appearances and the memory fragments in their rooms.

The other type were fictitious characters who came out of thin air directly from the Dream World. They were fabrications of his imagination and the Dream World itself.

Roland was now not sure about his theory, however.

Isabella told him that, according to her service records during the time she had served the Pope, Zero should be between 200 to 250 years old. Therefore, it seemed impossible for Zero, the pure witch who never aged, to "imprison" a person living 800 years ago. Although Zero was much older than ordinary people, numerous figures in history had had much greater longevity than her.

Zero had been born after the establishment of the church. Based on seniority, Agatha and some other witches were old enough to be her grandmother.

"Could the person in the picture intrude the Dream World by herself?"

This hypothesis was even bolder and more inconceivable.

"How can a woman from an ancient civilization survive in modern society and disguise herself so well? Where was her soul before the existence of the Dream World?"

Also, Lan's physical appearance contradicted this hypothesis.

She was elegant and graceful indeed, but she was by no means attractive, which meant that she was not a witch. Without any extraordinary power, one would, without exception, return to the earth 100 years after one's death, no matter how great they used to be.

The most reasonable explanation, although the least creative

one, other than the above-noted two assumptions, was that the two people happened to look the same. In other words, it was a pure coincidence.

It would save Roland a lot of trouble if he adopted this theory, but he had a hard time convincing himself. "Is it really a coincidence?"

To find the answer, he probably had to ask her in person.

Roland felt a little reluctant to enter that increasingly bizarre Dream World. At the same time, however, he did not like the feeling of throwing himself into the unknown and being kept in the dark either.

In theory, it was better to pick the lesser of two evils. After hesitating for about a week, Roland finally made up his mind.

It was worth mentioning, though, that the nagging Taquila God's Punishment Witches and the free time after the tour of the Holy City of Hermes had also contributed a great deal to his decision-making process.

...

Roland was now accustomed to entering the Dream World. When he woke up, he noticed the calendar still showed the date on which he had last left. The surrounding had not changed a bit during his one month's absence. The picture of the martialist trainees on the nightstand still looked new as if they were recently brought back from the headquarter of the Martialist Association.

Roland took out his cell phone and dialed Garcia's number.

He soon got through and heard even breathing on the other end of the line. "Hello?"

Roland glanced through the window. The first hint of dawn was faintly visible in the east. "Are you doing morning exercises?" Roland asked.

"Cut the crap," Garcia snapped as she usually did, but her voice was no longer as crisp as before. "What's up?"

"Well, I want to discuss something with you. Is it a good time for you? I can come over now. We can have breakfast together, my treat."

"Is it that urgent?" Garcia was silent for a moment. "Come down. I'm in the alley right in front of the apartment."

"Wait for me." Roland hung up, got changed as fast as he could and dashed out of the room. When he passed the living room, however, he found Zero, still not entirely awake, half-dressed. It was apparent that the little girl had just woken up. Her wrinkled pajama tumbled down to one side, revealing half of her lovely fair shoulder. She was waddling in a pair of oversized men's slippers, which were apparently his.

Roland clapped his hand over his forehead. He had no choice but to turn around and help the little girl get dressed.

"Just a moment... I'll make some water downstairs..." Zero mumbled.

"That's OK. I'll bring you breakfast. You just wait here for the food after you brush your teeth and wash your face." Roland patted her on the head and pushed her into the bathroom before he scurried out.

Chapter 910: A Problem in Dreamland (Part II)

"Beef stew soup noodles for two, here you go!" The restaurant owner placed two bowls in front of them, exhilarated and gleeful. He even gave the table another quick wipe. Apparently, he believed that the arrival of the martialist had enlightened his simple premises, for Garcia was, after all, a celebrity in the apartment.

"Thank you. Can we also have a fried egg, please?" Roland drew out two sets of chopsticks. "One for each."

"No problem!"

"If I were you, I would definitely not pick this place to eat breakfast with a lady." Garcia rolled her eyes. "No wonder you're still single."

"This is slander!" thought Roland. If he wasn't such an honorable man and above flirting with the God's Punishment Witches, they would have taken him long ago...

"Um, Zero has to go to school later, and I need to bring her breakfast. If it's too far..."

"I understand. That's why I say this shouldn't be regarded as an example." Garcia interrupted him. She split the disposable chopsticks and mixed the green onions and beef together. Soon the soup noodles turned an appealing brownish red color. She first blew on the noodles to cool it down and then slurped them as if they were long, flowing ribbons.

The slurping sound made Roland's mouth water.

"Wow." Roland twitched his lips. "You know how to eat fast food pretty well. I thought you weren't used to this kind of street food."

"That's just your assumption." Garcia shrugged. "I've been here for almost 10 years and have tried every restaurant around this area. It's just basic manners for a host to pick a relatively decent restaurant. Plus, I don't like being stared at by strangers all the time."

Roland now noticed that not only did customers in the restaurant look in this direction from time to time, but random passersby as well. Apparently, Garcia's distinctive gray hair and toned body attracted a lot of people's attention.

"Oops... I forgot about that."

"So let's get down to business." Garcia cast him a cold glance. "Why did you suddenly need to see me? The Martialist Association won't help you with anything illegal."

Roland wondered why she was so alarmed. He had just returned from the headquarter yesterday and did not do anything illegal. Was there anything more illegal than the hunting license?

Roland hesitated for a while before answering Garcia's question. "I want to meet your master. Can you book an appointment for me?"

"Huh?" For a moment, Garcia did not follow him.

"Your master... Ms. Lan." Roland soon made an excuse. "I feel regretful for bailing on her last time, so I want to apologize to her in person."

Garcia studied him with great interest as if he were a stranger to her. Then she waved away Roland's request and said, "Really? Now you know how important to have my master as a reference. Save it. She won't see you anymore."

"Perhaps Ms. Lan doesn't hate me as much as you imagine."

"Do you want to tell me that she was nice to you at the orientation?" Garcia said carelessly, "Get over with yourself. You've missed the chance I once gave you. My master will never

waste her time on a person who doesn't even abide by the basic etiquette of punctuality, not to mention meeting them."

"Regardless, make a call first." Roland insisted.

Garcia seemed to notice something. "You... you don't really want to make an apology to her, do you?"

"If I can learn some training methods for martialists from her, that would be even better." Roland managed to keep a straight face.

Garcia twitched her lips. She was about to dissuade Roland from pursuing such an unrealistic idea, but she, in the end, picked up her cell phone.

"By the way, what's your master's number..."

"You can't get through anyway. You have to get a SIM card from the association to connect to the headquarter." Garcia gestured him to keep silent and then spoke to the person at the other end of the line, "Hello, it's me..."

But she hung up within three minutes.

"I knew it."

"You knew what?"

"That she would refuse! She even reproached me for calling her again." Garcia grunted. "She's completely disappointed in you. Her tone dropped by at least an octave when she heard your name."

Roland was surprised at the unexpected result and did not understand why. Based on the attitude of Lan toward him at the orientation, she had seemingly not been very angry with him for standing her up for the first appointment. Instead, she had thought quite highly of him. Roland had felt her use of a hidden language was a demonstration of her excellent skills of applying the Force of Nature, so it did not surprise him that Garcia knew little about it. Now he wondered if he had been hallucinating.

At first, Roland had not been very eager to solve the mystery. Even after he entered the Dream World, he was hesitating, but the little defeat just now made him decide to get to the bottom of it.

"Oh, well." Roland took a small sip of the soup. "So when can we visit the headquarters again?"

"After you can deal with the erosion yourself and officially become a martialist. You're as green as grass at the moment."

Roland thought this requirement was reasonably straightforward to meet, but he managed to not reveal his thoughts. "I'm looking forward to that day. By the way, do you still remember the opening speech of Ms. Lan when we arrived at the underground hall?"

"What about it?"

"She said the Battle of Divine Will is around the corner. What does that mean?"

"Well, that..." Garcia replied resignedly. "My master is very fond of a book written 50 years ago, by the name of 'Raison d'être.' She recommended it to me, too. The book develops some theories on how a civilization emerges and evolves. The author calls it the deity's choice. This deity isn't a personified character, but actually a rule, or rather the purpose for the continuity of everything. But these theories are too abstract for people in this world, and they have nothing to do with us. As the book is only circulated in the Martialist Association, few people know about it."

Garcia's answer alarmed Roland. Without a doubt, it was a book he had never seen before, which meant it was a creation of the Dream World itself.

"Can I take a look at it?"

"The book is in the headquarter. I can borrow it from the library next month when I report my work." Garcia glanced at Roland curiously. "If I still remember."

Noticing that Garcia was starting to be suspicious of his motives,

Roland wolfed down the noodles and excused himself.

He breathed a long sigh after waking up from the Dream World the following day.

Everything in the Dream World seemed to be normal when it was not associated with the Martialist Association, but anything that involved the Association appeared to be sketchy.

Although the investigation this time did not go well, it was not wholly fruitless. One big success was that the God's Punishment Witches, who had waited for so long, had once again been able to gain various physical sensations in the Dream World. Seeing them have a good time, Roland felt the trip was worthwhile.

Roland was about to take advantage of his recovery to have a few more trips to the Dream World to get things moving faster when Lightning suddenly flew into his tent with a swallow-tailed eagle under her arm.

"Your Majesty, your express mail." The little girl mumbled. "It's an encrypted letter from Neverwinter."

Directly from the Western Region? This isn't a short trip. Did anything happen in Neverwinter?

To save on messengers, regular mail such as reports on governmental affairs were typically sent to the old king's city by water and forwarded by Theo and his men to him. A swallow-tailed eagle was the largest among all the animal messengers, and it required the highest power. The good thing about using a swallow-tailed eagle to deliver mail was that the animal was at the top of the food chain and it was relatively secure. The drawback of this method was that it would consume a significant amount of the witch's power. It was relatively hard for Honey to control such a fierce bird, due to the energy required for a swallow-tailed eagle was three times that of a gray eagle.

Roland stroked the limp animal messenger and took the sealing

ring off its claws. He stood rooted to the ground the moment he unfolded the letter.

"The Demons' army has appeared in the Barbarian Land?" This was earlier than he had anticipated!

Chapter 911: The Gleaming Star of Doom

Four days later, Roland had assembled all the leading staff that was campaigning Hermes and the Northern region. An emergency meeting was held in the First Army's campground within the suburbs of the Holy City.

Despite everyone feeling the great urgency of the meeting, no one panicked. Both the General Staff and the military officers of the Western campaign were making conjectures as to whether His Majesty had had new plans in mind. The murmuring of the discussion did not cease until the king entered the tent with a long face.

"I call a meeting, to those present." Roland tapped the desk. "We must return to Neverwinter at once."

A commotion between the staff instantly broke out after this curt announcement.

Ever since Roland had first received the encrypted letter, he had his doubts. The source of this information was questionable at best. Although the news was shocking, there was not a single shred of solid evidence corroborating Lorgar Burnflame's statement. There weren't even any details about when and how she encountered these demons. The threat of an entire demon army couldn't be ignored, however their whereabouts are still unknown and there would still be unrest in this region if the current operation changed dramatically. Roland remained hesitant.

Waiting a few days however, Roland received no shortage of rattled animal messengers that directly flew from the Western region. There must be no doubt a state of emergency has been declared in Neverwinter.

The letters confirmed this. He had details about Lorgar's injuries, the demon in delirium and the problems extended to internal conflict with the arrival of Sleeping Island witches. These letters

should have been arriving at his desk chronologically, where the most recent mail should have been the last to reach him. The reality however, was a complete reverse.

The messages that had the most urgency also used some of the largest birds. As a consequence, he had received the most recent encrypted mail first.

After reading all the letters, Roland had developed a rough idea of what had happened. He had learned from the third encrypted letter that Lorgar had actually used Lightning's map to locate Taquila ruins, intending to train herself and improve her combat skills by fighting demons and large demonic beasts.

After talking to Lightning, he had confirmed the validity of the news.

And at the same time showed a favorable impression towards the wolf girl's persistence.

Roland wondered if he had been too harsh on her when they first met.

Fortunately, Lorgar had survived with the help of Nightfall's Seed of Symbiosis. With the statements Lorgar has given. If he returned to Neverwinter in late autumn, his enemies would have already established themselves on the Barbarian Land.

This is indeed a great piece of intelligence. Roland thought she even deserved a Special Award for the Service of Neverwinter. Maybe he should also fulfill her dream of becoming a top-notch warrior and equip her with a full set of heavy weapons. That sort of support would further her combat development immensely.

"That's the situation we're in now." Roland relayed the key information of the encrypted letters to the people on the floor and surveyed the audience gravely. "We have to suspend our current plans in this region. As of today, all companies should start making preparations for a retreat. I'll withdraw first and restore the

situation in Neverwinter as fast as possible."

Tensions in the room increased dramatically. Most of the people on the floor had heard about demons and knew full well that they were the biggest enemies to the entirety of Graycastle and a threat to mankind. Despite being knowledgeable about the rumors, none of them actually faced a demon. The leading staff was not quite sure on how deal with the current situation and the whole tent fell deadly silent.

Roland understood that the news caught everyone off guard, they needed time to adjust to the matter at hand.

After quite a long silence, one of the officers of the General Staff, Sir Eltek, raised his hand. "Your Majesty, can we trust the information we're getting?"

"It isn't easy to forge Soraya's mark or Honey's animal messenger," Roland answered positively. "Although I haven't double checked yet, I think we can treat the situation as a special case because after all, it isn't easy to handle matters with demons."

"True... but what about matters with the Kingdom of Dawn?" The Duke of Evernight asked the most important question.

"We'll save him for sure. Graycastle won't abandon any of its allies." Roland cast a glance at Andrea who looked pretty worried. "The King of Dawn will have to pay for what he's done. The wrath of Wimbledon might be late, but it'll come sure enough. I'll make other arrangements, however the First Army won't be involved."

Nobody raised objections after seeing Roland's determination. The general staff was thus ordered to draft a proposal for the troops.

The First Army was familiar with an emergency operation. The troops knew the objective at hand. They could launch an attack and retreat in an orderly manner. Therefore, Roland wasn't too worried that he's leaving control.

The secondary city hall in the Northern Region supervised by Duke Kant would be responsible for the provision of supplies and allocate staff to the new and old Holy Cities. Isabella, together with the New Committee of Nuns and the garrison in the Northern Region, would stay behind until the transfer was completed so that the dregs of the church would not have the opportunity to resurge. The Hermes Plateau had been thus, successfully annexed to Roland's territory.

As to the New Committee named by Roland. He had it had been instilled with a new doctrine of ideas that pushed for loyalty towards him and ease pressure off the witches. Roland believed he would leave the assessment of the organization to the future and decide whether it could replace the previous church and function as a tool of political propaganda to help with his ruling at some point later. His current top priority was to re-establish the order in the Holy City so that it would not be a deserted land before the arrival of the Battle of Divine Will.

These policies had indeed been more or less implemented before he had received the encrypted letters. Now he just had to expedite the process. The only thing he needed to do now was to continue the war against the Kingdom of Dawn, but with different means.

After the meeting, Roland asked Andrea to stay.

"Without the support of the First Army, we'll need a change of plan." He went straight to the point.

"Please don't worry. Princess Tilly and the witches from Sleeping Island will make sure nothing happens to Neverwinter." The blonde witch comforted him, although she looked a little apprehensive. "You've done your best. You don't need to force yourself if you really can't."

"You're wrong..." Roland shook his head. "Without the First Army, we can opt for another solution I had in mind. Do you think Appen Moya's castle and knights can save him if I aim for his head?"

And, If we forego the open battle, we can even probably save Otto Luoxi as well. If this goes to plan, we can overthrow the king and take control the region much quicker than we had originally anticipated."

"Faster?" Andrea was confused. "Are you planning to..."

"I am." Roland curled up his lips. "It won't be easy to persuade them, for they're now so close to having their final confrontation with their lifetime enemies, the demons." Roland paused for a moment. "50 God Punishment Witches are as powerful as 50 Extraordinaries. You can never underestimate them even in the age of the Union. Nobody but I can stop their effectiveness in a battle. Neither God's Stones of Retaliation nor the swords of knights can effectively protect them. Appen is living on borrowed time."

Chapter 912: Chapter 912 An Idealist (I)

"Dealing with The King of Dawn never posed a real problem for me. The real problem lies in maintaining order in the Kingdom of Dawn. You should know very well that it isn't our intention to pick another Moya, or a person who favors the royal family as the subsequent sovereign." Roland looked directly into Andrea's eyes and continued, "I thought my interference would justify this political movement, but now I'm afraid the three families have to come forward and take over from here."

It was pretty obvious that someone had to be there to clean up the mess after Appen Moya fell from power. As the reputation of the King of Graycastle and his impregnable First Army was a powerful deterrent to all the nobles, even if Earl Quinn did become the regent of the kingdom, the nobles would naturally believe he was the puppet controlled by the Wimbledon Family.

Under the new plan, an intervention from Graycastle had become impossible. Since the God's Punishment Witches were not politically involved, Roland had to carry out his plan in the name of the three families; otherwise, the diplomatic battle would turn into a revengeful assassination, which Roland wanted to avoid.

The new plan would bring the Quinn Family both upsides sides and downsides. The downside of it was that the Quinns would become the target of criticism, whereas the upside was the potential increase in their reputation and prestige. If Earl Quinn could take this opportunity and successfully exercise control over the City of Glow, he would have a chance to elevate himself from regent to the new King of Dawn. It was definitely a trade that would bring more benefits than harm to Earl Quinn, especially considering his actual personal qualities and influence over the region.

Andrea quickly understood the key implications after a ponderous moment. "But then you'll... gain little from this new

plan."

"Better than Appen continuing to plot against me. At least, it can save Otto's life." Roland did not approve or deny. "Like I said earlier in the meeting, I won't abandon anyone who has made a contribution to Graycastle that easily."

"I see..." The anxious look on Andrea's face gave way to a look of gratitude. "Miss Edith is right. You're truly a kind king. "

"Wh-what?" Roland was taken by surprise. "Edith Kant? What did she say?"

"Well, she predicted that you would save Lord Otto before we marched for the war. In fact, I probably wouldn't have decided so quickly if the Pearl of the Northern Region hadn't advised me to do so."

Really?

Roland managed to keep a straight face while nodding nonchalantly. "Well, since you've made up your mind, I'll write a letter to Earl Quinn detailing the operation procedure and alliance with Graycastle. Also, although most people would make the right choice under such circumstances, I want his consent to be guaranteed. Therefore, I need you to go to the City of Glow with the God's Punishment Witches to make sure he does what I told, and follows operation procedure. To be completely honest, I trust you not your father, so I have to ask you to hang in there for a bit longer. Once the problem is solved, you can come back to Neverwinter with the witches."

Relieved, Andrea once again exuded her dignity as a noble. She lifted her skirt and dipped in a curtsy. "I certainly cannot turn down your request, after all, you've done so much for us already. Also, I have a letter for Princess Tilly and hope you can forward it to her."

"Naturally." Roland agreed smilingly.

After Andrea withdrew, Nightingale frowned. "What the heck is she doing?"

"Are you talking about Edith?" Roland stroked his chin. "Um... they probably brought up that matter during a chat. After all, both of them were present at the pre-operation meeting. What, you didn't think she would view me as a nice person?"

"I don't think she'd say anything good about you even if you were the best man in the world." Nightingale shrugged. "She doesn't seem like the sort of person who talks about things like kindness..."

Roland was about to say something in reply when the guards outside the tent suddenly lifted the curtain and reported to him. "Your Majesty, Lady Edith Kant requests to see you."

Oh-ho, things are becoming a little interesting now.

He exchanged a look with Nightingale before instructing the guard. "Send her in."

"As you wish, Your Majesty!"

The Pearl of the Northern Region performed a bow unceremoniously after she entered the tent. "Your Majesty, I wish for you to change your plan and stop interfering with the affairs of the Kingdom of Dawn."

Roland drew his brows together. "You should have brought that up during the meeting if you wanted to say something. Now I've already made the decision, and it would reflect poorly on me if I change it again."

"That's why I come to see you alone after the meeting," Edith said slowly. "You can still carry out your plan but with some small adjustments. In this way, people will think it's due to some unforeseen circumstances that the mission has not been completed as planned. At the same time, you'll still be able to keep to your word."

At these words, Nightingale could not hold back anymore. She revealed herself and confronted Edith directly. "What exactly are you plotting? You asked Andrea to turn to His Majesty for help. Now you want us to stop interfering in the affairs of the Kingdom of Dawn. Don't tell me that there are no conspiracies going on here!"

Normally, people would feel embarrassed or hesitant when someone pointed out their contradictory behaviors, but Edith remained unflappable as if she had known this would happen. "The situation has changed," she answered calmly. "You can detect lies, can't you? So you should know that I'm telling the truth."

"State your reason." Roland was intrigued.

"The unstoppable pincer attack would make your name known to the whole Kingdom of Dawn. Even if Earl Quinn becomes the regent, civilians would know who the real ruler of the country is. When the demons aren't a threat, you can slowly exert your influence over the policies of the Kingdom of Dawn and gradually convert it to your territory. As people fear the powerful First Army, you could have easily achieved this effortlessly. However, your advantage is now gone."

Edith drew up her hair and explained methodically, "The entry of the army of Graycastle to the city and the coup perpetrated by Earl Quinn are two completely different stories. The latter would largely increase the earl's authority in the region. As for whether other nobles would choose to submit to his rule or plot against him? It'll be none of your business."

"Then we just let Appen Moya continue to conspire against Graycastle?" Nightingale questioned.

"Even if Your Majesty doesn't do anything, it would be hard for Appen to keep his throne. At least, he can't call his bannermen anymore. After the battle in the old Holy City, Appen's authority and integrity are being called into question, so he's no longer able

to rule the state like he used to. The Kingdom of Dawn will soon descend into chaos." Edith's tone was so flat as if she were merely laying out the facts. "During this political chaos, Earl Quinn still has a chance to win the game of thrones, but his influence will definitely be limited. Moreover, If Otto Luoxi is lucky, he'll survive. Even if he doesn't in the end, Andrea won't blame you because it isn't your 'fault', Your Majesty." She stressed.

Andrea must have also thought about that. That was why she reminded Roland that "you'll gain little from this plan".

Roland knew it very clearly as well. However, he attached greater importance to a reliable ally than personal gains. Even if Earl Quinn would not give him full support, he believed the upcoming Battle of Divine Will would eventually eliminate all the misunderstanding and mistrust between people. When there is an enemy that threatens the very survival of human civilization, the most important thing they should think about is how to jointly eradicate the enemy.

The Pearl of the Northern Region should know what their top priority was, for as far as Roland could tell, she was definitely not a shortsighted person.

If she did let her lust for power cloud her judgment, Roland would be truly disappointed.

Chapter 913: An Idealist (II)

Roland gazed at Edith after disclosing his thoughts. "Do you really think it would be better to leave the Kingdom of Dawn as it is than have it ruled by Earl Quinn?"

Edith looked as if she had already known Roland would ask that. "In fact, I don't think the two choices would be much of difference in a short term. A reliable ally can provide you with resources, people, and assistance in the Battle of Divine Will. You can trust Earl Quinn since you've got his daughter Andrea, but you can't say anything about other nobles."

"She... admitted that?" Roland was now confused, wondering what the "short-term" she referred to meant. He had thought Edith would focus on the untrustworthiness of the nobles to establish her argument.

"On the other hand, if the Kingdom of Dawn sinks into a state of chaos, in order to re-establish order, a war would be inevitable. The Kingdom would definitely be weakened in wartime and the state would inevitably fail. By that time, refugees and deserted lands would be all that is left in the Kingdom of Dawn, just like the Eastern Region and the Southern Territory in Graycastle. You can obtain these lands populations effortlessly, and unlike the first choice, these people would belong to you forever."

"But didn't you just say that an ally can provide not only population but also resources and assistance for the war effort?" Nightingale questioned agitatedly. "How does it make sense to you that one benefit is the same as three? Besides, has it never occurred to you that those refugees would die of hunger or exposure to the elements during relocation?"

Edith instantly shot back. "It seems that three sounds certainly more promising than one, but there's a condition. In order to make full use of the ally's resources, His Majesty would first have to

make some investments, for example, a steam engine, Golden Twos and even ammunition and weapons. Without these, the Kingdom of Dawn has nothing to compete against demons with, let alone supporting Graycastle on the battlefield. It's a significant investment, although with quite a high return. However, we can't just ignore such a sumptuous amount of money when we can barely satisfy the need of Neverwinter itself. Therefore, I hold that the benefits of the two plans are approximately the same."

Roland raised his brow. He knew very few people in Graycastle understood risk and reward in investing. Barov, for instance, would definitely refuse to provide his own technologies and products to support a neighboring country.

"Then why do you think leaving the Kingdom of Dawn as it is would be a better option if there's no big difference in gains?"

"Because of witches, Your Majesty." Edith's answer surprised both Roland and Nightingale.

"Witches?" Roland was stunned.

The Pearl of the Northern Region stuck out one finger. "Yes. Please think it over. If witches are no longer persecuted in the new Kingdom of Dawn — or rather, under the influence of Andrea, Earl Quinn starts to follow your example and hire witches to help with the production and construction of the country, newly awakened witches facing no death threats, would stop moving to Graycastle. This is one of the potential losses."

"Second, the Kingdom of Dawn is geographically more advantageous than Graycastle. Witches in the Kingdom of Wolfheart and the Kingdom of Everwinter would move south in the event of demon invasion or persecution from the dregs of the church. However, once the situation in the Kingdom of Dawn is stabilized, will they still move to Graycastle? The answer is no. It's probable that the number of witches in the neighboring countries would exceed that in Graycastle in several decades. I'm actually

more concerned about this than the loss of current witches."

"Isn't it good... that everybody lives a happy life? What're you so concerned about?" Nightingale's voice was less provoking than before.

Edith ignored Nightingale but directly looked into Roland's eyes. "Has it ever occurred to you that one, or several witches with incredible abilities, would instantly make one kingdom outstrip another?"

"A witch like Anna?"

"That's right. Anna, Agatha, and Soraya... they all have incredible abilities. The moment you won their support, Neverwinter surpassed the domains of other nobles. This is also why you've achieved such great accomplishments so far." Edith said slowly, "Apart from that, you have a wider breadth of knowledge and greater wisdom than anyone else. As long as you're still the king and no one leaves the Witch Union, few could challenge Graycastle's position, except demons."

Edith paused for a few seconds at these words. "But what about the future in over 100 years when the government of the neighboring countries operates the same way as Graycastle's and when witches are employed in various areas? The knowledge you wrote would inevitably spread to cities and towns outside Neverwinter. By that time, people will study the method of machine manufacturing and learn everything you've taught them... If there's one single awakened witch in the Kingdom of Dawn possessing an irreplaceable ability, Graycastle would probably fall behind!"

"That's im—" Nightingale immediately attempted to refute Edith's theory, but she swallowed her words halfway.

"Plus, you now largely rely on various magic powers such as Anna's ability to carry out your construction and development plan. Can you guarantee, however, that Anna's power is the

farthest a witch can go?" Edith stressed each syllable with due strength. "If a new witch possesses a more ingenious ability than Anna, will the future King of Dawn still view Graycastle as his ally?"

Roland almost wanted to applaud her speech.

Edith was not focusing on immediate gains but was actually envisioning a scenario in the distant future. Ordinary people may only foresee changes in a few years' time, but Edith was picturing what would happen a century later!

Furthermore, Roland somehow sensed an upcoming explosion of technological innovations in her speech. As a person who had learned about the history of the industrial revolution, Roland knew very well that major technological changes expedited over the past few hundred years. It took apes thousands of years to learn how to make fire, but it took only a decade for human beings to enter the Information Age from the Steam Age. A person living in the modern society might experience technological changes that would otherwise take thousands of years in the past.

Now, the presence of witches might further shorten the interval between each technological change, and the emergence of one or two powerful witches might bring a new technological revolution. Edith was right. If Anna had awakened in the City of Glow, Roland would have no idea how far he could go.

Roland could almost foresee what the future would look like when the members of the Witch Union gradually entered their years of decrepitude while new powerful witches appeared in the Kingdom of Dawn. This was also the reason Edith insisted on leaving the Kingdom of Dawn as it was if Roland was not able to get full control over it.

Roland believed if he were a lord born in this world, he would have definitely been convinced by Edith just now. All kings wanted their kingdoms to endure through time, and for their descendants

to perpetuate their glory. They would never create a rival that would potentially pose a threat to their own country.

Roland could still change his mind and abandon Otto to his fate. To do that, he just needed to break his promise and deceive Andrea.

However, he was not that kind of person.

It wasn't the country that Roland really cared about.

He did not care about what his kingdom would look like after his death. Compared with an everlasting kingdom, he was more interested in the advancement of the entire human race. No matter who his successor was, Roland did not have an obligation to assist him in ruling the state. His life goal in this world was to improve the standard of living in Graycastle and take it to the next level while at the same time unveiling the mystery of the Battle of Divine Will.

As for which of the four kingdoms was the strongest? He would leave the choice to people living here.

Last but not least, he wanted to stick to his principles of being an honest and righteous man. He realized that he could never easily break his words for personal gains, nor could he lie in negotiations. His instant resistance to Edith's proposal made him understand that he would never truly become an outstanding politician.

"An excellent argument." Roland looked at Edith with satisfaction. "However, I won't take my words back."

"Your Majesty..." Edith was surprised.

"I know what you want to say. You want to say that a wise king should always seek the best interests of his country and that it's normal to cheat." Roland interrupted Edith. "But there are rulers in this world other than kings..."

"Other... rulers?" Edith echoed in confusion.

"That's right. For example, an idealist."

Chapter 914: Anna's Prediction

After taking care of the affairs regarding the Kingdom of Dawn, Roland returned to his mansion deep down the campsite.

The manor, which consisted of several attached two-story stone houses, a huge front yard, and a backyard, used to belong to a wealthy merchant. Since its original owner went missing during the Hermes riot, Roland used it as his temporary residence.

When he entered the master bedroom, he found Anna sitting at his desk reading the book he had retrieved from the Dream World. The sunlight that fell through the window blazed off her bangs and gilded her pale face with a rim of gold.

"Is the meeting over?" Hearing his footsteps, Anna turned around and asked him happily.

"Yes, I told them everything they should know. Nana and the others will take off first thing in the morning."

"Have a foot bath first." Anna rose and put a water basin on the stool next to the bed. She then helped Roland take off his shoes and socks. The boots Roland wore on the plateau were made of sturdy leather, quickly giving him sore, smelly feet. Therefore, the first thing Roland did after work was to take a foot bath and put on a pair of light, soft shoes. At first, he insisted on doing it himself, but Anna was determined to help and refused to take no for an answer.

"How's the temperature?" Anna put her Blackfire into the water and let it sink to the bottom.

"Maybe a little hotter than this... Ah, that's perfect." Feeling the warmth wash over his feet, Roland sighed deeply.

Apart from heating up the water, the Blackfire could also turn into a rollerball to massage the back of his feet and soles. It would then cover his feet and dry off the water residue.

This is such a pampered life.

"What about you?" Anna sat down next to him. "Are you leaving with Nana?"

"No, but Sylvie is. Her monitoring ability is irreplaceable for the garrison." Roland held Anna's hands. "My return would certainly ease their minds, but they have to learn to solve problems without me. Besides, the main force of the First Army is not ready so I would be of little use. Once Maggie transports Nana and Sylvie, she'll transport us."

Since Hummingbird's ability did not apply to living beings, Maggie could only take around two people on her back at a time. The maximum number of people depended on the weight of each individual. Lightning could also carry one passenger, but she would fly much lower when loaded, almost touching the tips of the trees. Her service was thus considered not very safe for a long-haul flight but could serve as an alternative in the event of an emergency.

It was a long trip from Hermes to Neverwinter. Even if Maggie continued to fly after the sunset without taking a break to search for food, it would take nearly three days to cover the distance. Roland had no choice but to gradually transport witches based on how urgent their tasks were needed.

Fortunately, the troops would slowly advance toward the south along the inland river, which would shorten the wait time for the transportation services.

"If only there were a faster commute." Anna looked up. "For example, a machine that soars through the sky."

"That isn't easy, unless —" Roland was about to say that it was impossible to build a real aircraft without an internal combustion engine when an idea suddenly flashed across his mind. He instantly withdrew his previous remark and said something else instead. "Hang on, that's probably doable."

"How?" Anna's lake-blue eyes flickered with excitement.

"By using Wendy's and Mystery Moon's abilities," Roland answered meditatively. "If it's an aircraft with the purpose of transportation, it might work if we combine their abilities!"

Roland was actually inspired by Maggie's bombing plan. If he did not pursue generalization and mass production, a lot of witches' abilities could actually replace machines.

After three years of research and development, he had successfully obtained light aluminum materials in Neverwinter and had also established an Arithmetic Academy capable of performing large-scale computing. Together with a central carrier used to verify computing results, there was a significant chance that he could build a glider that required little or no power.

The most important part of this attempt was Wendy's control of the wind and an electric motor that powered Dawn I.

Simply speaking, an aircraft can fly because its engine produces thrust that pushes the plane forward. In the meantime, a pressure differential created by the airflow on the upper and lower surfaces of the airplane wings generated a lifting force.

Due to the limitations of the current technologies in Neverwinter, the electric motor presently in use was not powerful enough to lift a plane. However, Wendy's wind could provide a lifting force to the aircraft by directly creating an "air pressure differential" beneath the wings. In that case, the electric motor would only need to provide a horizontal thrust force. In the same way, in which Lightning had adjusted the direction of bombs in the air, Wendy was required to apply moderate force to help the plane take off.

"To enhance the flight's duration, the glider's wings should be as long as possible." Roland became increasingly excited as he recollected what a glider looked like in modern society. "But to maximize the lifting force before its takeoff, the aircraft must have a wide wing to fully embrace Wendy's wind control area. Also..."

A regular, well-designed glider, relied on hot airflow to increase its flight altitude and enhance its flight duration. Roland's unique glider, however, would be supplied continuously with upward airflow generated by the witches. This meant that the aircraft could operate as long as Roland wanted to, provided that the magic power didn't run out.

In other words, once a runway was built at the destination, the aircraft could transport at least 10 people at a time. Even the slowest glider could reach a speed of more than 200 kilometers per hour, which was three times faster than Maggie in the form a Devilbeast. With such a glider, they could reach any city in Graycastle within a day.

Needless to say, it would be a slow and time-consuming process to manufacture the prototype and train the pilot. Even if he started the project now, by the time the glider was launched, the witches and the First Army would have already arrived at Neverwinter.

Nevertheless, the idea of inventing a glider exhilarated both Roland and Anna, who dwelled on this subject for quite a while. For human beings who came from and returned to the earth, flying was their biggest ambition. Unlike a lame hydrogen balloon, a glider allowed people to truly soar the sky.

Edith gave Roland wise advice on ruling the kingdom, whereas Anna shared his thoughts and ideas on new technologies and innovations. She was the only person capable of having a conversation with him on such an academic level.

"By the way," Anna carefully organized and put away the sketch of the glider and meeting notes, "was there any good news during the meeting? You haven't looked as relaxed as today ever since you received the letters from Neverwinter."

"Well, sort of." Roland curled up his lips into a smile and told her about his conversation with the Pearl of the Northern Region briefly.

When Anna heard Edith's reasoning, she could not help bursting into laughter.

"What's wrong?" Roland asked curiously.

"I want to say that she's overconfident in our learning ability. To understand everything you've taught us? I'm having a difficult time learning advanced mathematics, let alone physics and chemistry..." Anna grimaced. "I feel like I'll never completely understand the orange book even if you give me another 100 years."

"Haha." Roland laughed. "There are many similar books in the Dream World."

"And I don't think the future will turn out the way she thinks."

"Really? What do you think will happen?"

"She thinks it's better to let the Kingdom of Dawn sink into chaos if you aren't able to secure a dominant position on the continent through a flanking attack. However, I, believe there's more than one way to win people's respect. When you lead us to fight against demons and eliminate all those fearsome enemies who invade our kingdom, you'll be treated with reverence, an honor that no other king can possibly attain," Anna said in a serious tone. "When you eradicate the church and win the Battle of Divine Will, the witches would all remember your great services and the Taquila witches would also be proud of you. Your name will be found in every book you've written, and you'd be permanently associated with the knowledge you've brought to the masses. You'll not only become a part of our history but will also be remembered by everybody in present time. You would enjoy such high prestige that the lords from other kingdoms would come to seek your protection and request to be under your jurisdiction. Nobody would challenge your authority because those who betrayed you have already provided an illustration of what happens when they commit treason. In the foreseeable future, there would probably be only

one kingdom, with its territory reaching to the Fertile Plains, where mankind is vigorously reviving the glory of the human race..." Anna paused for a second and then asked, "Is there anything wrong with my prediction?"

Chapter 915: To the End of the World

"Of course there isn't." Roland poked her forehead affectionately. "On the contrary, I feel it's exactly something you'd dream."

"Why are you so happy about what Edith said then?" Anna asked in bewilderment.

"I'm not happy about her prediction. History itself has a lot of variables and possibilities," Roland replied smilingly. "It's already hard to learn from the past, let alone to predict the future. For instance, we may survive the third Battle of Divine Will but suffer a miserable defeat in the fourth one 100 years from now. Another option is that the enemies lurking at the bottom of the ocean are too powerful for us to conquer them, causing us to be exterminated from Earth's surface... By that time, we don't even know whether the human race could persevere, not to mention the continuity of our kingdom."

"Hmm... this is something you typical for you to think about," Anna commented, mimicking Roland's tone. "What makes you so happy then?"

"Her vision on things." Roland spread out his hands. "When she said something like that, she became a governmental officer rather than a regular noble with a title."

"A governmental... officer?" Anna tried to repeat the mouthful word.

"Correct. She wasn't speaking as an official from the Northern Region but as one who governs the entirety of Graycastle. She's making policies based on the direction the entire kingdom is heading toward, which is a rare and invaluable quality for people born in this era. It's something that even Barov fails to pay attention to. As a City Hall director, he always weighs pros and cons from the perspective of Neverwinter."

It was indeed a game changer. From the beginning, Edith Kant, as an ordinary noble in the Northern Region, had been assisting the ruler in governing the state, while at the same time seeking benefits for her own local region. It was the most common mindset among local nobles. Only the territory granted to their family was what truly belonged to the noble, causing them to place their own benefits over that of the king, although they had pledged alliance to the monarchy.

"Another thing is her attitude toward witches." Roland went on, "It's foresightful of her to associate witches with technological revolutions and then incorporate their abilities into the development strategy."

Roland knew it was entirely different to blindly follow an order than to understand the reason behind it. Although he had developed the idea of "science and technology constitute a primary productive force and witches are the best driving force" in his book, most City Hall officials did not really see the significance of treating witches fairly. They did so merely because it was the king's order. The public did not understand the rationale behind it either. They gradually accepted witches because of the convenience the latter brought to them. Their mutual relationship was, as a matter of fact, as delicate and fragile as a thin thread that could easily snap off upon a conflict or a misfortune. Only when people fully recognized the absolute necessity of witches would they engage more deeply.

In fact, Roland was more pleased with the shift of Edith's attitude toward witches than the change in her political mindset. With the centralization of power and the diminish of feudal rights, more officials would eventually accept the concept of unity. However, it would probably take a much longer time for them to grasp the nature of the witches' abilities.

Having said that, Edith was not perfect. Although she was more insightful of the future than most people, she failed to see some

other possibilities besides the continued dominance of the Kingdom of Graycastle. Her thoughts and ideology were still primarily bound by the era.

Nevertheless, Edith was, after all, a young woman about the same age as Nightingale. It was thus healthy for her to have an ambition of building an everlasting empire. Roland was curious what kind of governor she would become in 20 or 30 years when she had been imbued with all sorts of modern concepts and ideas Roland was currently striving to advertise.

After hearing Roland's explanation, Anna tilted her head and asked, "Since the future is unpredictable and you don't care about what Graycastle would look like after your death, what are you planning to do if we survive the Battle of Divine Will?"

"You already know, don't you?" Roland looked into her azure eyes.

They had discussed their future several times when they had been cuddling in bed. Roland intended to visit the Land of Dawn across the Fertile Plains and even take a look at the demons' territory. He also planned to cross the Sealine and reach the other end of the ocean. Apart from that, he wanted to unveil the mystery of the deities and learn the truth of the world. To this end, Roland would use every resource available and force not only residents in the Kingdom of Graycastle but every single person on the continent to contribute to his entrepreneurial undertaking. Anyone who attempted to stop him would be viewed as his enemy.

"Remember to take me with you." Anna grinned. "I don't want to miss the adventure."

"Of course. I'll definitely take you wherever I go, even to the end of the world." Roland pressed a kiss to her lips.

Neverwinter and the Third Border City.

Tilly stood captivated before the magic core, watching its every movement. Its outer frame dilated and contracted as the magic power rose and declined, like blue sea water as if the core was breathing. At the center of the pyramid flickered a yellow light orb. Like a gemstone washed and polished by tidal waves, the orb got Tilly's full attention.

As long as the orb was illuminating, the Five-Colored Stone would be fine.

"If you feel tired, go take a rest." Pasha's voice suddenly popped up in her head. In the meantime, Tilly heard a rustle behind her. "If I notice something, I'll let you know immediately."

Tilly turned around and found a huge blob drop down from the ceiling. Although all the Senior Witches looked the same after their conversion, she could somehow tell them apart after staying with them for a few days.

"I'm not tired. It's been just five days..." Tilly yawned at these words. "... I'm a bit drowsy, that's all."

"When I still felt sensations, there was no difference between those two." Pasha swayed her tentacle. "Don't worry. The Magic Stone is intact, which means that the witches are still safe. If they do encounter demons, they will break the stone."

Tilly also knew that, but she could not find peace in her mind. She regretted staying behind and felt a little annoyed at the fact that she had been persuaded by Ashes' silly argument.

Technically, the operation should not be too dangerous, all the selected witches were excellent combatants who had participated in the battle against the church. The way they insinuated themselves into demons' lair would also be pretty much the same as that they had attacked the church at Fjords — Lotus would be responsible for creating an underground shelter, and Orbit would dig a short passage for the rest of them to travel in between two locations. With this method, the enemies would only be able to

find an enclosed cave beneath the earth even if they saw something out of character.

The key lay in the final step. To expand the visual field of the phantom instrument, they should break the magic stone somewhere with a relatively high altitude. Tilly had planned to locate the spot with the Stone of Flight herself, but Ashes took over her job.

Tilly had confirmed through the few maneuvers before the operation that it was highly unlikely for demons to spot her if she took action at night. However, Ashes insisted that a leader should not put herself in danger. As a result, she was left behind with the magic core, unable to do anything.

Chapter 916: A Second Trip to the Ruin

"... I used to be like you." Pasha suddenly broke the silence. "Every time my friends went to war, I would wait at the city gate. The Union even built a high tower there for people to rest. They would know immediately if someone came back."

"Are you talking about Taquila?" Tilly asked.

"Yes, but after a few years, nobody but the garrison visited there. Do you know why?"

"..." Tilly did not reply but she already knew the possible answer.

"Because all we got was disappointment and grieve in the end." Pasha put her tentacle on Tilly's shoulder. "Witches are connected through magic power. Our bond is much stronger than blood. Once we get to know each other, everyone would become our sister, no matter if she was an ordinary combat witch or a member of the Blessed Army. However, the intimate relationship also generated negative emotions on the tower. It was frustrating to see bodies be sent back from the front on the day of return. When our outer defensive line gradually shrank and nobody needed to depart for war, the Union ordered the high tower to be torn down."

"Are you trying to say that it's unnecessary to wait for them?"

"Quite the opposite. I want to say that the fact that you're still longing for their return means that you haven't truly lost something," Pasha said in a slow and gentle tone. "I hope you'll never turn into someone like me, who views sacrifice as the new norm."

"I have lost a lot of things. I made many decisions when I left the palace for Sleeping Island. A lot of them were decisions of loss and gain, and I had to abandon some of my closest friends... As long as I choose the right path, I won't hesitate. But there's someone who is different. There's always one or two people that hold a special

place in my heart, who always make me restless." Tilly held the stone ring of Lightning in her hand tighter. It was no problem for her to control the two Magic Stones alternatively, but Ashes could not even fly a straight line with the two Stones. Therefore, she had to keep the ring to herself.

Nevertheless, Tilly did not reveal her thoughts but simply nodded slightly. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. I'll go check how the digging of defensive line at the border is going. There's a room with a bed near the entrance to the hall. You can sleep there if you want."

"Got it."

After Pasha headed back the way she had come, Tilly suddenly had a cold feeling around her palm.

She spread out her hand and found one corner of the magic stone fixed by the ring had come off. The fragment sank into her flesh and left a tiny bead of blood on her hand.

...

"It's been five days. Why haven't we seen the ruins yet?" Lotus grumbled. "It's so boring hiding underground all day."

"How do I know? In any case, I'll go wherever your tunnel is heading." A girl with braided hair shrugged. She threw a piece of dried meat into the air and then opened her mouth. With a flash of blue light, the dried meat disappeared and her cheeks puffed up. "Yum... So it isn't a lie. Life in Neverwinter is indeed luxurious. Even their rations are so delicious."

"T-tunnel? Do you think I'm a mole?"

"Pretty much."

"Um... you'd better go easy on the food." Iffy sighed. "I don't want to return with an empty stomach."

"I don't want to be lectured by a witch from the Bloodfang

Association." The girl jerked her head away from Iffy. "I've heard that you once conspired against Princess Tilly. If I were her, I wouldn't even share wheat cakes with you, let alone dried meat."

Iffy rolled her eyes.

"Enough." Ashes cut in with a resigned look. "It wasn't their fault in joining the Bloodfang Association. If Tilly heard you say this, she would definitely give you a good lesson."

"Oh... well." Hearing Princess Tilly's name, the witch finally became quiet.

"This is another witch who is too hyper for her own good." Ashes thought to herself while breathing out a sigh. This witch, who took particular attention to her appearance, was called Orbit. Despite her flamboyant style, she played an indispensable role in this operation.

Orbit's ability was incredible. Before she had become of age, she could create an invisible passage connecting two locations. The passage could not be detected by the naked eye and it covered no distance. In other words, she could transfer herself from one place to another within a blink of an eye. If there was something like a wall or a door in-between the two places, Orbit would act as if it didn't exist. As long as she continuously applied her ability, the passage would remain open.

Nonetheless, her magic power could only affect an area within a radius of 15 meters. If she was the entrance of the passage, this number would drop to around 7.

After she had entered her adulthood, Orbit had obtained a derivative skill called "Magic Mark" that largely increased the practicality and the coverage of the passage. The passage would be visible to a person marked by Orbit, whereas one without a mark could not stop Orbit from moving around even if he knew where the passage was.

There were also certain dangers with this ability. For example, Orbit could withdraw her ability when a marked enemy was just halfway through the passage. The enemy's body would then be snapped in half and appear in two separate locations when the passageway was sealed.

Tilly thus proposed that Lotus and Orbit should work together to open a secret tunnel with an invisible exit so that the enemies could not locate the witches even if they found the hole. By the time the demons realized there were many similar tunnels, the witches would already be several miles away. Hence, the operation plan was, technically, absolutely safe.

Using the stone tower where Agatha had initially been found as their starting point, they left Misty Forest and headed to the northeast. As the forest close to Neverwinter was completely under Leaf's control, they did not need to worry about any threats from hybrid demonic beasts.

However, Ashes soon found a practical problem they had not anticipated during their maneuver and that was navigation. During the trip, they had only needed to cover a distance of a few kilometers. Yet when this number increased by dozens of times, it became very hard to determine which direction they were exactly heading to. Although they would use stars for orientation, nobody knew whether they were on the right track.

"How about checking the map Lorgar brought back?" Lotus turned to Ashes for advice. "Perhaps we can find a couple of landmarks that would help us navigate. Then we would know how far we were from the ruin."

Ashes nodded, although her hopes were not high.

On the map were some bird nests, beehives and bears' caves, which offered them few clues as to where they were. Perhaps only Lightning and Maggie could read the map and find the right direction.

"Shhh!" Iffy suddenly gestured at them to keep quiet.

The three of them instantly fell silent.

Soon, they heard patterings of heavy footsteps overhead. The shuffling sound indicated there were at least four or five people. Since hybrid demonic beasts rarely acted in groups, they were most likely the patrol team of demons.

The footsteps soon faded away. It was obvious that the enemies did not notice someone was hiding beneath the earth.

This was the second time today.

The attack of the wolf girl apparently had alarmed the demons a great deal.

After all the demons scurried off, Iffy let out a sigh of relief. "Well, at least that tells us that we're in the right direction."

"But the problem is that we can't see the ruin of the city and thus can't place the light curtain at the right spot." Lotus shook her head. "In order to use the phantom instrument as an alarming device, we have to put the light curtain five or six miles to the southwest of the ruin. This way, the Taquila witches would see Devilbeasts when they fly toward the Western Region."

After pondering for a while, Ashes made the final decision. "We'll march for another night. I'll go up and check where the Taquila ruins lay at dusk tomorrow."

Chapter 917: Ashes' Plan

"Ashes, the demons aren't blind!" Iffy quickly refuted Ashes' suggestion. "As soon as you see Taquila by the setting sun you'll be immediately spotted! There's no place to hide in the sky. Do you want to expose yourself with no way to fight back?"

"Iffy is right, it's too risky of a move." Lotus added. "Lady Tilly told us that the Stone of Flight only lets you fly up and down and not laterally. Once you're discovered by them, you can't escape. Can't we at least do this at night?"

Ashes felt incredibly touched by all their comments, especially the one coming from Iffy. Just a year ago, she was at her neck when she was with the Bloodfang association and the leader of the association, Heidi Morgan, had been plotting to kill her and Tilly. If Tilly had not insisted on tolerating the Bloodfang Association, she would have waged war against them long before. Ashes had never expected Iffy to start showing concern for her since she thought that rift between Sleeping Island and Bloodfang Association would never be completely healed.

Ashes suddenly felt that she and Iffy were on the same team now.

She was happy to see these changes happening. Ashes understood that teamwork was what was needed to go forward.

"But I can't see anything in the darkness of the night. Taquila must be covered in vines by now and I also can't find the ruins if there's no light around. I think early dusk is the best time," Ashes insisted. " And maybe we didn't go astray and the ruins are just behind some big tree or by a low hill. All I have to do is to fly up and crush the Magic Stone in my hand."

"But what if some flying demon nearby spots you?" Lotus knitted her eyebrows. "You'll only be able to use, at most, 10% of your strength in the air right?"

"Don't worry. I've already figured out a strategy to handle these problems," Ashes calmly explained while holding three fingers up. "Depending on the situation, I'll use one of three different plans."

"Oh?" Orbit came closer curiously. "You sound like Lady Tilly now."

"Really? How do these plans of your work?" Lotus also appeared to be intrigued.

"Listen to me carefully, the only enemies who can discover me must be some Mad Demons riding flying Devilbeasts, so I came up with three different situations. A different plan if one, two or more than that come to attack me."

"Oh my..." Lotus felt helpless and covered her forehead.

"Bahaha, you really plan to get caught?" Iffy broke into a chuckle.

"Hey, don't interrupt. Let me finish talking about my strategy and then you can comment."

"If I were Maggie, I would raise both flags in favor for you." Orbit said with seriousness. "Now I know why she enjoys taking part in your plans now."

...

In the end, Ashes managed to get everyone to hear her out.

After hearing Ashes' strategy, the witches agreed on her plan since none of them could think of a better one. In Lotus' view, although the three situations Ashes talked about in the beginning sounded a little absurd, her countermeasures were unexpectedly good. In Iffy's eyes, Ashes' plan was just based on her animalistic intuition and accumulated fighting experience.

After another day of traveling underground, the light coming through the vent began to dim. At first, the white clouds seemed to be hazed with a fiery red and then they gradually melted into the evening sky. Obviously, the sun was now going down over the

Fertile Plains and it was the time for them to act.

Orbit patted Ashes' back and gave her a Magic Mark. It was a light blue spot above her head and looked like a shimmering puddle which made the witches feel as if they were standing underwater and looking up at the blue sky through the intermittent ripples.

Ashes knew that this was not the real scene outside, but just how the magic corridor looked.

After confirming that there was no demon patrol team around, she nodded to the other three witches and injected her magic power into the ring. An indescribable feeling came over her afterward. She felt as if an extra arm or leg was growing out on her body. Tilly described this process as getting invisible wings.

It was difficult for a person who was born with no flying ability to suddenly control these wings like how birds soar through the sky. Among the Sleeping Island witches, Tilly was the only one who uses the Stone of Flight with ease.

Ashes closed her eyes, imagined herself flapping the wings, and jumped!

After a moment, the absolute silence of the underground space was replaced by a variety of sounds. She felt the fresh air blowing across her face and heard a rustle of leaves ringing beside her ears. She also heard birds tweeting, buzzing insects, and the whistling sound of the evening breeze which caressed her cheeks.

She opened her eyes and saw everything clearly. Everything on the ground quickly shrunk and the exit of the magic corridor was now just a tiny spot of light.

She had to admit that it was quite an experience worth trying once in a while.

Ashes controlled her excitement and gazed to the north, where Taquila should be, however Ashes' heart quickly sank.

As Ashes looked at everything ahead of her, she did not find anything that looked like a ruin let alone the skeleton monster mentioned by the Wolf Girl. She found nothing except some shrubs and meadows crimsoned by the setting sun.

Did we head in a completely wrong direction?

She wanted to find the Impassable Mountain Range to help determine her location. However, when she turned around, she was stunned by the sight of massive monsters that crouched among the jungle in the southeast a few hundred meters away. Those huge things were obviously manufactured by demons and the broken walls of the Taquila ruins stood right below them!

The witches had thought that they had not yet arrived at the ruins, but now Ashes realized that they had already passed the ruins due to their accumulated deviations!

If the witches drew a line from where they had started their journey to Taquila and where they were now, it would only be a few degrees between. However, in reality, such a small deviation could determine whether their location was in the front of or behind the Taquila ruins when they arrived.

Ashes hesitated. If I go back now and ask the team to turn around and head south, it'll take us at least two or three days to arrive at Taquila . However, If I flew towards the ruins at the same speed as I flew up, I'd only need less than half a day to fly to the ruins to locate the place and return to the team. The only problem is that I'm only able to fly vertically. I've never tried to fly horizontally.

What should I do?

Before Ashes made a decision, a burst of dull horn sounds blared from Taquila.

A dozen Devilbeast on the back of a skeleton monster leaped up and flew toward her! Meanwhile, numerous Mad Demons emerged out of the earth around the ruins and closely surrounded the Holy

City of Taquila.

"Well, it seems they're quite vigilant and there's obviously more than three of them. This is much worse than I imagined" Ashes thought.

She took out the Five-Colored Stone and crushed it without any hesitation and flew directly towards the ground.

For any warrior, the most important ability was to act appropriately according to the situation. She intended to capture the enemy alive if there was only one Devilbeast, eliminate all of them if there were two and retreat if the number of enemies numbered higher. She was never afraid to fight that many demons however she wouldn't be able to defeat them all before more reinforcements came and endanger her whole team.

As for the current situation, it was way too risky to fly to the Taquila ruins. She had to crumble the stone now even though she did not get to an ideal position.

She was not as talented as Tilly who could control the invisible wings like using her own arms, but she had her own way of making flight faster.

Ashes needed to inject more magic power into the Magic Stone.

As the magic power grew in the stone, Ashes felt that the invisible wings on her back gradually swelled to the limit and each imaginary flapping of them could cause a howling gale. She descended sharply from the sky at a speed which was almost three or four times faster than when she flew up.

Under such circumstances, even the precise spear throwers of the Mad Demons couldn't hit her.

The only problem was that inertia was too great to overcome at such extremely fast speeds. Because of the limited depth of the Magic Corridor, Lotus could only create an empty hole, which was at most as deep as five or six meters. Within such a short distance,

she could hardly stop the downward momentum by herself.

All Ashes could do was to put some faith in her teammates.

After several seconds of falling, Ashes saw a small blue light appearing on the ground. That's the Magic Corridor.

She folded her hands and put them on her head while tightening the muscles all over her body.

The moment she penetrated straight into the magic corridor, she saw several purple lights emerge out of the air and firmly grasp her. It was Iffy's Magic Cage!

In an instant, the cage stopped her from falling rapidly, and when she completely stopped, she found that there was just an arm's length between her head and the bottom of the hole.

"You're really heavy," said Iffy, her hands clutching the cage. She shrugged and added, "Now, do you know where we are?"

"Of course, but let's not discuss about this right now." Ashes looked at Orbit. "Retreat to the Misty Forest right now. The demons are coming!"

Chapter 918: The Only Definite Thing

Three days had passed. Tilly was walking around anxiously until she saw the four witches when her mind was finally put at ease. Judging from their dirty faces and forced smiles, she could easily tell that their trip must have been filled with accidents and risks. Fortunately, they were safe and lucky enough to escape from the demon army after being discovered by them.

Tilly was about to say some words of comfort, but after seeing Ashes' unapologetic face, she became upset and began to reprimand the Extraordinary, albeit slyly.

"I've never expected that a person who boasted of experiencing hundreds of battles in the wilderness would get lost," Princess Tilly satirized. "Tell me how you managed to get from Hermes to kings city and not just wander into the Southernmost Region? This is unlike what you've shown me."

"Uhh... well there were so many church people chasing me at that time. Everytime I was lost, I would catch one of them and have him tell me where the correct direction was," Ashes shrugged. "And we didn't deviate too far away from the planned route this time. At least, we could still see the Taquila ruins. If the demon army hadn't gone into action, I would have been able to see..."

"Without adequate Red Mist, they'll never send out all their troops. We sent you to gather information about the enemy since we need to guard against the Devilbeasts' surprise attacks. But when you crushed the Magic Stone, we could only see the demon army from behind and at a very bad angle!"

"Everyone is back safe and sound. It's the ideal outcome. Besides, the angle isn't that bad," Pasha interjected. "His Majesty Roland has sent back the first batch of witches from the north and Sylvie was among them. With her, our scouting ability will be greatly improved. And we've seen the enemy's rear, which will help us to

judge the scale of the enemy's main force and reinforcements. You can go back and have had a good rest first."

"Oh? We got messages from the Northern Region?" Ashes raised her eyebrows and asked.

"Yeah, lucky for you, if these messages didn't come you wouldn't have easily gotten away with this." Tilly snorted. "Well... Excuse me, I have to go now!"

"Wait." Ashes looked at Pasha with a vague smile and then hurriedly caught up with Tilly.

"Is there anything else you want to tell me?"

"No, nothing, let's just head back." Ashes twitched her mouth and said.

After they returned to the Witch Building, Ashes wrapped her arms around Tilly from behind when the princess closed the door.

"I'm so sorry, I worried you and-"

"Did Pasha tell you to do this?" Tilly asked without turning around.

"Uhh, how'd you know?" Ashes was slightly startled.

"I clearly see it on your face." She broke away from Ashes' arms. "I'm guessing that Pasha told you that I didn't have any good rest these past few days and that I've stayed around the magic core most of the time. She must have told you to forgive my bad mood and to try your best to comfort me since I'm exhausted."

"Amazing... to think you could guess all of that," Ashes stood astonished.

"So, could you apologize to me first?" Tilly turned around.

"What? No." The Extraordinary shook her head.

"No?" Tilly glared. "So, you think it's right to worry me?"

"There should be no problem, you're not in any danger. And

that's all I need for a decision."

"Ashes, you don't understand." Tilly was furious. "Any risk can be calculated, measured and evaded. The person who performs the task is also included in the calculation. If the person isn't good at the task, even a perfect plan will be ruined. Do you understand? If it was me, the situation would never become so dangerous!"

"Calculate, measure, evade... You sound more and more like Roland Wimbledon now." Ash shrugged and said.

"Don't divert the topic." Princess Tilly remained unmoved. "Isn't it true?"

"But there's always risk. And I want to be the one to take it, even if accidents are likely to happen. After all, I've already had countless accidents in my life." Ashes, who was much taller than the princess, bent forward and put her hands on Tilly's shoulders so that their eyes were level. "Listen, I have a very good reason to not apologize to you. Now that we've decided to stay here to fight demons, I'll have to take more chances to risk my life and go to dangerous places. One day, I may be unable come back and I don't want to owe you lots of apologies."

"Hey, don't pull this on me!"

"Listen to me please, Tilly," Ashes said seriously. "I'm not as talented as your brother and it's too difficult for me to think about things like the future of witches. so taking risks is the only thing I'm good at. If you're determined to return to the Sleeping Island now, I'll immediately promise you that I'll never let you worry about me, but I can't guarantee that here. I would never ask you to apologize to me if you make me worried."

Tilly was speechless. She looked into Ashes' golden eyes and felt that this black-haired witch in front of her seemed to be more reliable than ever before.

No, Ashes is talking nonsense. Tilly denied it in her heart.

"Ahem," she turned her head aside and said. "I guess I can forget about this incident for now, but you have to tell me about the whole thing later. Now go take a shower. You stink."

"Alright." Ashes breathed a sigh of relief. "Do you want to take a bath together with me?"

"No, not now!" Tilly grumbled.

Tilly watched the Extraordinary leave and then lifted her right hand to check a tiny wound.

On her right palm, there was a spot which was pricked by a ring. It was already healed, but the pain was still fresh in her memory.

Fortunately, the worst didn't happen.

Perhaps, I'm thinking too much.

...

When Lorgar woke up from her long slumber, she felt an incredibly comfortable sensation in her body. It felt as if she was soaking herself in a warm spring and was completely free of dizziness and pain.

Yes, I remember now. It was Nana Pine. The Wolf Girl vaguely recalled something had happened before her sleep. Nana had run into her bedroom while panting. The lovely, little girl had probably got back in a hurry without any rest. The first sentence she heard from Nana was "Have a good sleep now. You'll be alright when you wake up." She also remembered that she had seen her friends from the exploration group, who had uttered many words besides her bed. However her mind went blank when she tried to remember what they said back then.

The feeling of Nana's magic power flowing through her body was so wonderful that she had forgotten almost everything.

"So I'm fully recovered now? I should express my thanks to Nana," Lorgar thought.

Unexpectedly, after she opened her eyes, the first person she saw was a gray-haired man.

She was stunned. "Great... chief?"

"It's me." Roland nodded. "How do you feel now?"

"I... don't know how to describe it." She tried to move her finger. It was still clumsy, but she managed. "I think I'm fine. How long have I slept? Where's Nana? And...what are you doing with your hand..."

"Oh, this? I just thought that they looked interesting, I hope you don't mind." Roland stopped touching Lorgar's wolf ears and took his hand back. "I've been curious about how they feel like. Do you feel... well, ticklish when I touched them."

"No, they're just ears," Lorgar was surprised and said. "You can touch them if you want. I'm fine with it if you don't mind them."

With these words, the Wolf Girl wiggled her long ears.

"I'm done with it for now." He coughed twice and continued. "You've slept for about three days. This is a normal duration since you were severely wounded. Of course, you would still recover if you didn't take this long sleep. But in that case, you would feel extremely tired and uncomfortable during the recovery process."

Lorgar was slightly surprised. "Do you mean I've slept for three days in a row?"

"Yes. If Nightfall didn't stop the Symbiosis, you would've slept for longer." Roland smiled. "Your body woke you up. After you get up, you'll feel hungry soon."

"Oh, yes, Miss Nightfall. I have to go to thank her and the other witches." The Wolf Girl wanted to get up, but Roland gently pressed her down in her bed.

"Don't rush. Take your time to deal with these things," Roland said with a smile. "But before that, on behalf of the City of

Neverwinter, I have to thank you. You did a good job, Lorgar Burnflame. Neverwinter will reward you."

Chapter 919: Repay the Great Chief's Kindness

"Now will you admit that I'm qualified to fight the demons?" Lorgar felt refreshed all of a sudden.

"I've never denied your ability to fight against them. In fact, even an ordinary woman who's unable to tie up a chicken will end up being involved in this mighty war, albeit behind the main defensive line." Roland reiterated his concern. "I only objected to your desire to fight them by yourself. If the Sleeping Island witches had come any later, without Nightfall's Seed of Symbiosis, you would have been buried in the Western Zone Cemetery by now."

"But if I hadn't gone that deep into the Barbarian Lands, Neverwinter would never have received the news about the incoming demon army," Lorgar retorted.

"I can reward you for a good result but I still wouldn't ever approve of your wrong behavior because of it." Roland shook his head. "What I'm happiest about in your actions this time is your bringing the message back to Neverwinter instead of fighting the enemies alone in the Barbarian Lands. Even if you were to ask me this same question again, I would give you the exact same answer. No, I don't want you to go to fight the demons by yourself. I'll ask the sentries to step up vigilance from now on, in the case that you might someday come back to the city more dead than alive."

"What?"

"This is the great chief's command!" Roland remained unmoved. "Let's talk about your reward first."

"Well..." Lorgar found that the look on the great chief's face was far more serious now than when he had been touching her ears. "That's fine."

"There are three types of rewards. You may choose between gold

royals, Chaos Drinks, or a piece of equipment custom-made for you."

"The first two choices are easy to understand, but what's the last one? Is it some kind of iron claw or steel tusk for me to use in my wolf form? I had previously considered obtaining this kind of weapon back in the Wildflame clan. However, when I transform back into a girl, these weapons that are inconvenient to carry will become a burden for me." Lorgar thought to herself.

She raised this question to Roland.

"I don't have a specific design for the weapon in mind right now, but I can tell you that it'll be a mighty firearm that can dramatically improve your combat capability," Roland explained. "Ashes told me that you could transform selective parts of your body into their wolf form while in your human form, and that in this half-animal form you would have half of the strength of a God's Punishment Warrior. Since this equipment is specifically designed for the God's Punishment Witches, I think it'll also suit you."

This firearm mentioned by Roland reminded her of the fierce weapons used by the First Army to destroy the oasis watchdog. She remembered that Lightning also had such a weapon. It was indeed powerful, but it also depended on the operator's skill. More importantly, she knew that it used a very special kind of "bolt" that could only be produced by Neverwinter. She believed that the great chief would never give her any of these "bolts", as he would never allow her to leave the city on her own. Without these "bolts", this firearm could only be placed at home as a showpiece and would not give her much help.

After all, it was just a weapon. Compared to this external force, she had more faith in her own teeth and claws.

After a little thought, Lorgar said, "Can I choose to join the Witch Union?"

This choice was completely beyond Roland's expectations. He was surprised and replied, "Yes, you can, but earlier you told me that..."

"I changed my mind." The wolf girl wagged her tail. "Both the gold royals and the Chaos Drinks will be used up one day and I've no other special skills besides my fighting ability, so I think I'd better join the Witch Union. As a member of the Union, I'll get gold royals and free drinks every month, right?"

"Well... yes, that's right."

"In addition, I've promised Lightning and Maggie that I'll explore all of the Barbarian Lands together with them. Since both of them are members of the Witch Union, it'll be more convenient for me to take action with them after I join the Union. Under such circumstances, you wouldn't stop me from going deep into the wasteland, right?"

"Ahem, you're technically right, but you still need to place your own safety as your most important priority."

"Then this is the reward I want," said Lorgar. "I'm sorry I rejected your kindness before."

"Well, it's up to you." Roland laid out his hands and shrugged.

"Now, do I need to sign a contract?" she asked with a solemn face.

"Of course, Wendy will tell you everything later." Roland stood up. "I'll ask the kitchen to send you something to eat. Have a good rest first. You'll have many chances in the future to thank Nana and the other witches."

Having seen Roland leave the room, Lorgar's ears drooped and she lay back down on the bed.

There was one thing that she had kept a secret from Roland.

It was the genuine reason why Lorgar finally decided join the Witch Union. She had not been attracted by the free drinks and the

gold royals.

As a Mojin, she was more convinced by facts than words. From the very beginning, she had doubted Roland's promise to the Mojin people and had refused to trust a nobleman from a northern kingdom. She had believed that she would one day return to the Wildflame clan and become Roland's enemy again when he ultimately betrayed the Mojin. Besides, Roland's comments during their first meeting had indeed irritated her. She had never anticipated that he would show any concern for a Divine Lady of a Mojin clan. Even though the conflict between the Mojin people and the northern king had already been resolved, her suspicion of him still remained.

However, her opinion of him had begun to change.

During the Symbiosis period, the Witch Union kept telling her that she only needed to hold on a little longer to get Nana's treatment, since they had already sent a number of letters to appeal to Roland Wimbledon for help. Back then, she would never have expected that the great chief, busy recovering his territory, would send Miss Nana back from the Northern Region of Graycastle only for her sake.

In Lorgar's memory, it was an exceptionally long journey from Iron Sand City to the Endless Cape, and Roland's kingdom was several times larger than the Southernmost Region. Given that, she had suspected that it would take at least one or two months for Nana to return to Neverwinter.

However, the great chief had sent Nana back in time. Surprisingly, despite being a healer of great importance to the army, she had turned out to be the first witch to be sent back from the north. With this in mind, Lorgar found that it was hard to doubt Roland's sincerity.

Even Maggie had to fly for three days to take a round trip between the Northern Region and Neverwinter. If the great chief

did tell her the truth, that meant Nana had come to her rescue the moment she had arrived at the city. Such kindness would make any warrior in the Southernmost Region willingly take an oath of allegiance to the lord.

Lorgar could hardly be regarded as a professional warrior, but she was a pure Mojin.

Faced with the facts, she wondered, "Why not believe in the great chief more?"

...

Roland left the bedroom and went downstairs to the reception hall on the first floor.

The guards at the gate opened the door, and all the people inside the hall stood up simultaneously at the sight of the king.

Before he arrived back at the Western Region, Lightning had brought his convening order back to Neverwinter. He steadily stepped into the crowded hall while taking a glance at everyone assembled before him.

There were more than 50 people here, including the City Hall department heads, the commander of the Garrison of the First Army, the representatives of the Witch Union and Sleeping Spell, the governor of the Longsong district, and the Senior Witches of Taquila. They wore various kinds of facial expressions. Some seemed to be bewildered by the unknown enemy and some showed unmasked hatred towards the demons, while most of them looked solemn and serious.

The war was close at hand, no matter whether they were prepared or not.

Chapter 920: The War Plan

After Roland took a seat, the people in the hall bowed before sitting down.

Under his leadership, the small and remote Border Town had rapidly developed into a major city. Roland could clearly see that he had become a spiritual leader in the eyes of the conference participants. He had never felt anything like this when he had given lectures to students at a primary school or when he explained his designs to his clients. All the people who attended this meeting were not only listening but also preparing.

They were always ready to execute his plans and orders.

He had a sense of achievement from seeing his administration bear fruit. Three years ago, only a few people in the castle had served him wholeheartedly whilst all the local nobles had ridiculed him. Now, however, he had a splendid team to assist him.

He went straight to the point. "Neverwinter can't allow demons to take root on the Fertile Plains, especially somewhere so close to our border. Although the enemy came a little earlier than expected, we've also made rapid progress recently. We've recovered the lost regions and can now focus on fighting the demons." He paused to glance around and said word by word. "Our next goal is driving the demons out of the Taquila ruins. We must do our utmost to achieve this goal. Do you have any questions?"

"No, Your Majesty!"

Everyone responded in unison.

Even Barov who usually preached against wars did not raise any objection since he was aware of the fact that most refugees came to the Western Region for the good order, capable king and safe environment. If the demons set up a base at Taquila and then kept harassing Neverwinter, the people would be terrified and even flee

the city. Without enough population, City Hall could no longer sustain the development of Neverwinter. He learned this lesson from the decline of the Eastern and Southern Regions.

"So let's talk about our war plan and policies now. Any department can share their ideas."

"Your Majesty, I think the top priority is relocating the industries in the north of the city as soon as possible." Barov was the first one to stand up and reply. "The people outside the city wall are the ones most vulnerable in the face of the demon invaders. Even when we finish constructing the new wall to protect the people, the flocks of sheep and herds of cattle will still hinder our troop deployment in the north. It's just like what happened when the whole city was placed under the strictest martial law." He paused to eye Wendy. "Due to the alert, the city gates remained closed, which blocked the transportation of wheat seeds and forest resources. Fortunately, City Hall had done everything in its power to minimize the impact."

Roland had already learned this from the previous reports. As Barov mentioned it again, he could not help looking at Wendy. Surprisingly, she seemed peaceful and undisturbed. He thought she must have meant it when she said that she would take full responsibility.

"Not everything in the north can be relocated. We can use paddle steamers to carry wheat seeds, mushrooms, and other resources into the city via the Redwater River. However, we can't move the North Slope Mine to another place. Additionally, it'll cost us a lot to rebuild the Furnace Area." Roland decided after a moment of pondering. "We should increase our vigilance over the mine region so that we'll be able to fight back when the Devilbeasts attack. As for the alert, I need to elaborate on this issue. When the city is under martial law, we need to evacuate the idle personnel on the streets and in the market, but all the factories must resume production and keep working from today onward until I give a new

order."

"I see... I'll make a list of the properties and business we can relocate, and report back to you." Barov immediately changed his tone since he realized that Roland did not want to place blame on Wendy.

"By the way, please include land-use planning in your report." Roland knocked on the map behind him. "Now that the threat in the Great Snow Mountain has been ruled out, all the area in the west can be used. With the help of Leaf, Misty Forest can serve as a natural barrier protecting our left flank."

On the map, the Barbarian Land could be divided into three parts. From left to right, they were: Misty Forest, Neverwinter grassland and the Impassable Mountain Range. Misty Forest looked like an inverted triangle, occupying almost half of the Barbarian Land with its vertex located at the snow mountain of the Western Region. The Redwater River that originated in the mountain and flowed through the border area of Neverwinter could be considered one side of the triangle whilst another side started from the vertex and headed to the Dragonspine Mountains in the north. This triangle formed a large buffer zone for the city.

At present, Leaf could cover the entire western section of the Redwater River and thus provided a safety net for the concrete boat platoons to transport coal and forest resources back to the city.

Aware of the situation there, Barov readily accepted Roland's request. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Your Majesty, I think we need to tell the public about the demons' origin as soon as possible," Wendy said. "Otherwise, our people will easily get panicked when seeing them suddenly. As you usually say, propaganda job is the most vital part of our administration. If we don't work to control the public opinion, some evil-minded people may take advantage of the people's fear."

"I agree," Alethea who appeared on the light curtain added. "Although common people have limited personal ability, together they can form a noteworthy strength. Fear resembles a whip. Most of the time, it's daunting, but it can also be used as a driving force for us if we handle it properly."

The early appearance of the demons disrupted Roland's original propaganda plan which was scheduled for after the unification of Graycastle and his enthronization ceremony. He thus chose to leave this problem to Barov. "You decide the content and the propaganda means by yourself. Remember to make sure that all the subjects understand that demons are enemies of the whole humanity and that we'll fight against them till death. Meanwhile, you should emphasize that in the face of guns and cannons, demons are nothing different from demonic beasts, no matter how hideous they look."

"As for the rumor mongers and troublemakers," Roland sneered and looked at the two police chiefs, Vader and Rene Medde, "I think I don't need to tell you what to do with them."

They hastened to nod. "Of course, Your Majesty."

Once Neverwinter finished discussing the wartime order and the related policies, Pasha raised a question which was likewise the greatest concern for everyone. "How are you going to attack the demons near the Taquila ruins?"

"The safest way is to set up artillery positions near it to destroy the demons' Red Mist supply equipment." Roland measured roughly on the map with his fingers. "Now our Longsong Cannon can hit targets 10 kilometers away. After some adjustment, it'll shoot even farther. Without Red Mist, the demons in the ruins will quickly die."

Roland did not brag about his weapons at all. Considering the operational convenience and the limited transportation capacity, he had not adopted 152mm caliber for the first generation

Longsong Cannons. As a result, they could not match an ideal cannon whose caliber was 152mm in many respects. However, he was able to quickly convert them by enlarging their chambers and using separate-loading ammunition instead of fixed ammunition. By doing so, their range would be remarkably increased even if the other parts of the cannons, such as the barrels and wheels, remained unchanged.

"Got it. Your Majesty, the Taquila witches are willing to fight this battle for you."

Taquila survivors were undoubtedly the most aggressive ones in the Battle of Divine Will. They would take the lead without any hesitation when combating demons.

"But, I still need to solve a few key problems to implement that plan." Roland shook his head. "Without adequate preparation, it's hard for us to gain a foothold when faced with an attack from the demons." He retracted his hand and flicked his finger at the spot of the North Slope Mine. "The first issue is how to solve the transportation problem."

Chapter 921: The Locomotive Era (Part I)

The North Slope Mine of Neverwinter was going to witness a great event.

A new railway linking the ore stacking yard and the furnace area was being cleaned for the last time.

Different from the iron coated wooden rails in the mine, the new railway was wider and could support heavier cargo loads. It was made of pure steel and looked very heavy. The amount of steel used to build it was enough to make the armor and swords for a regular knightage, but now it was fixed on the ground and exposed to wind and rain. Any lord of this era would think of this construction as an enormous waste of iron and believe that only a spendthrift would leave metal to rot like this.

When Roland led the conference participants to the ore stacking yard, most of the officials were astonished by the railway and begun to stir since not every department in City Hall knew the details of what it was. The officials from the Longsong Area stood agape while fixing their eyes on it. It impressed everyone with its imposing size and its aura of strength, even if most of them had no idea what it was used for.

They would never believe that their king who had greatly surprised them so many times during the past years was a spendthrift, but they could hardly recover from their shock. In their view, laying cast steel bars on the ground was no different from using gold royals to pave a road.

This was cast steel which could be sold at a high price in any city.

However, Neverwinter could afford to build such a railway.

After the blast furnace for ironmaking and the converter for steelmaking were completed, Neverwinter's industrial foundation no longer relied so heavily on the witches' power. The converter

still needed Anna to heat and melt the iron for the first step, but it was much more advanced than the "Star of Steel". It could be called a miracle in this era.

The smelting industry of the North Slope Mine had also been significantly upgraded due to the reconstruction efforts made by the Ministry of Construction. With the help of Lotus, they had taken bold actions to blast away the ceiling of the mine. By doing so, they had made part of the mining area a huge open pit and most of it was an iron mine.

Neverwinter's steelmaking industry had stepped on a brand new stage in the last year. In Graycastle, its monthly steel output was greater than all the other cities' combined.

This result was within Roland's expectation. He took it for granted that modern factories would be far more efficient than blacksmiths. Otherwise, he would not have worked so hard to create the industrial equipment.

As for the railway here, it was part of his experiment of using a railway to connect the mining area, the smelting area, and the wharf.

As the narrow-gauge rail did not differ from the broad-gauge rail in terms of material usage and load-carrying capacity, he made 1.5 meters the standard railroad width. The number was easy to remember and building roadbeds for this width of railroad was within the reach of Lotus' ability. The sleepers were cut out of wood logs and the ballast was from rubble collected during the mine reconstruction. The railway looked exactly like a railroad in modern times.

But it was still a half done project. Because no factory had been involved in this project yet, Anna had used her Blackfire to process and install the railway for the experiment by herself. Since the Graycastle unification war, the construction of the other half of the railway had remained suspended.

To further satisfy the officials' curiosity, Roland instructed the workers to unveil something that was placed at the end of the railway. When the canvas, which was dusty and covered with fallen leaves was removed, the people saw a black steel vehicle standing right in front of them.

"Your Majesty, is it a... steamer carriage?" Petrov, the governor of the Longsong Area, stuttered in amazement.

Roland was not at all surprised by Petrov's thought. With more and more steam engines being put into use in Neverwinter, the officials were getting familiar with these cumbersome, but powerful machines and even actively adopted them in some traditional fields, such as irrigating the farmlands and loading and unloading cargo on the wharf. Given that, they immediately recognized the steam engine which was shaped like a barrel and installed in a steel frame in the main part of the vehicle.

In the beginning, the factories producing steam engines and the accessory equipment had only been able to handle orders from Roland, but now they could also handle some requests from City Hall. City Hall's orders usually had special demands, but the factories could easily meet them by changing the combination of gears, shafts and engine holders.

Roland considered this change to be a good start. The people of this era were becoming more proactive in creating things.

He thought that the reason why Petrov called the vehicle a steamer carriage was that the concrete boats driven by steam engines were called paddle steamers.

It sounded like an acceptable name but Roland did not want to give up the naming rights.

After all, it was a vehicle of era-making significance.

From its birth, it had a profound influence on the world, even though its first prototype was slower than a horse-drawn carriage.

It had many different shapes and engines during its development, but its name remained unchanged.

"It's a train." Roland corrected Petrov. "It's the key to solving the transportation problem."

"Do you mean that you want to build a railroad like this one across the grassland for a... train?" Barov had a hard time getting his tongue around the new word. "What if the demons suddenly attack the workers and cause trouble for the railway construction project?"

"First of all, I want to build two railways side by side to ensure a smooth flow of traffic. Secondly, I'm not proposing building a railroad across the grassland. I intend to build one that starts from the Misty Forest and then turns to the east at a spot near the Taquila ruins." Roland told everyone his plan. "By doing so, Leaf can protect our railroad system from the demonic beasts during the Months of Demons every year. As for the demons... it's a close contest between us. Any place we can get to by train can be our battleground since the train can transport enough cannons and shells for us. Even if the demons manage to destroy some sections of our railroad system under heavy shellfire, we can still solve the traffic problem by building and repairing the railways at a higher speed."

He had discussed the construction speed problem with the Advisery Department. They found that they could build the railway sections between the Misty Forest and the Taquila ruins faster than the sections on the grassland, despite the former being longer than the latter. This was because the former sections were located in the forest controlled by Leaf. With her help, the weed and vines would clear the ground for the construction workers, saving them the trouble of doing it themselves, which was tremendously helpful to them. She could also create slopes for water drainage and structure the forest to help Hummingbird transport the construction materials.

Lotus would be in charge of building the roadbed for the railways. The Ministry of Construction would send workers to pave the ballast, install the crossties and railways, and Anna would seamlessly weld the metal parts together. With everyone working together, they would be able to complete the railway sections between the forest and the Taquila ruins before the end of the winter. When that happened, the Taquila ruins would be within the range of the Longsong Cannons.

Chapter 922: The Locomotive Era (Part II)

"In just half a year... Will it really be possible for us to extend the railway deep into the Barbarian Land?" Hearing Roland's plan, Barov, who had already witnessed many "miracles", still widened his eyes in disbelief. "It took the Ministry of Construction more than half a year to complete an ordinary road linking the Border Area and the Longsong Area, and this Kingdom Main Street was less than one-fifth of the distance between the forest and Taquila. Are you sure that Mr. Karl will be able to complete such a task?"

The officials began to whisper among themselves. The Kingdom Main Street was the first large-scale construction project Roland had initiated after Longsong Stronghold merged with Border Town. It had employed about 2,000 workers and had been considered a waste of resources by many people back then. Now this new railroad project was even more unbelievable. Considering its limited construction period, many officials believed that it would be an impossible mission, even if all the workers in Neverwinter were to be hired for this project.

Karl Van Bate, the Minister of Construction, remained silent and seemed to be racking his brain for a proper solution.

Roland was clear about their concern. At present, there were many ongoing construction projects in the city. They were justifiably worried that the expense of this railway project would be too enormous for the city's limited resources. However, in fact, as compared to the road's cement pavements which needed high-quality materials and roller compaction, the railway's roadbed building and ballast pavement were much easier.

As for the final step of installing the rails, it only looked complicated, but it was actually the fastest step of the entire construction process.

Roland had watched Anna's demo of welding the metal parts

with Blackfire. She could weld a bar to two tracks at once, and the average time for welding each joint was less than 10 seconds. In comparison to the traditional bolts or the hot-melting connections used in the modern world, her ability not only substantially improved the welding quality but also saved a lot of manpower and material. Roland felt that her work couldn't be any more perfect.

The experimental railway in front of everyone was an almost seamless rail made by Anna. To compensate for the distortions that could be caused by thermal expansion, there were still invisible gaps left in between the tracks, but on the surface, they were seamless. This meant that when the train was running on these tracks, the passengers inside it would not experience the frequent shaking or hear the constant clatter that were part of modern trains.

Ana had finished welding this section of the tracks in just half a day.

This was why Roland made the construction period for the railroad project so short.

Leaf probably needed only five days to place the crossties and rails in a section of a given length, while the workers used to take 10 days to build and pave a roadbed of an equal length. Meanwhile, Anna needed just one day to weld the same section of railroad. She had ample time and was able to take it slow. Maggie could take her to work in the morning and bring her back to the castle in time for lunch.

Roland did not want to explain the details of the witches' abilities to the officials, since not everyone knew the witches well. Meanwhile, he predicted that the construction period could be even shorter if he could find some relevant witches from Sleeping Island who were willing to offer help for the project. However, he had not yet had a chance to ask Tilly about her witches' abilities, since he had gone straight to the wolf girl and then to the meeting

immediately after he had arrived at Neverwinter.

Seeing Roland ignore Barov's question, the officials turned their eyes to the train.

In contrast to the seamless rail, which appeared very futuristic, the train itself seemed to be an antique. Its steam locomotive was divided into two parts. The front part consisted of a fourth generation steam engine and a transmission device, and the rear part was a coal car. A driver's cabin was located between these two parts, from where the drivers could control the speed of the train, add coal to the boiler, and blow the steam whistle.

Due to the interruption caused by the Gyaycastle unification war, this steam locomotive was still just an unfinished prototype, yet it was already much better than the first generation steam locomotives of the world where Roland had lived before. Its steam engine adopted crankshafts instead of flywheels and drive belts. Instead of gears, which could easily get stuck, a mechanical linkage which moved seamlessly was utilized to connect the wheels on both sides of the locomotive to the engine.

Roland had simplified his design for the locomotive as much as possible. As a result, it looked as if he had just patched all the main components together. When compared to a modern train, it had numerous defects. It had no mechanical brake and needed manpower to turn the capstan to stop the train. As the drivers' cabin was on the connecting beam that linked the front and rear parts of the locomotive engine, the drivers would be disturbed by the constant shaking and vibrations caused by the steam engine when driving the train. It was not equipped with any electrical device, so the drivers and the other workers on the train had to blow the steam whistle or shout to each other to communicate. However, it was already the best design possible based on the current technological capabilities of Neverwinter.

He had to build this prototype first, and then gradually improve it, just like what he had done with the first generation steam

engine.

"Your Majesty, what's the carrying capacity of this thing?" Kyle Sichi, the Minister of Chemical Industry, asked with curiosity. "Is it any higher than that of a concrete boat?"

"I think its cargo capacity should be almost five or six times that of a concrete boat." Roland was satisfied seeing the surprised looks on the officials' faces. "But this is just the beginning. With technical progress, it'll be able to carry cargo which needs 100 concrete boats to transport at once."

"A, A hundred?" Barov swallowed hard. As the City Hall Director, he was well aware of the meaning of the number.

"So... what about its speed?" Petrov asked in a trembling voice.

"I'm not sure. I'm still waiting for the test results, but it definitely won't be slower than a concrete boat."

In this era, horse-drawn carriages and some other pack animals were the principal forms of transportation on land. On the bumpy and soft ground, their transportation efficiency was low. Besides, carriages did not have any rubber tires or any other kind of shock absorption measures, so their wooden wheels often got shattered by the repeated shaking on the road. Under such circumstances, the Kingdom of Graycastle used ships as the main mode of transportation. In the inland rivers, the steam-powered boats, which did not need to move with the help of the wind, quickly outshone the traditional sailing ships. Given that, in the view of the officials, the concrete boats were already extremely fast and efficient carriers.

Hearing that a train would be able to travel faster and carry more cargo than a concrete boat, they fell into silence.

They instinctually wanted to deny such a possibility but felt reluctant to do so, since they were afraid that it might turn out to be true. Seeing the bewildered officials, Roland could not help but

feel proud. If he had told them such a thing two years ago, he would have been regarded as a lunatic. As the war was fast approaching now, and he had failed to improve the boats, he wanted to use this new invention he built to boost his subjects' morale.

After all, he had not exaggerated the strength of the train.

After all, the steam engine was only the first generation of industrial power sources.

Once the trains could be equipped with internal combustion engines, they would become the dominant mode of transportation on land.

"Your Majesty, could you please show us how it works?" Barov asked after a while.

"Yes, but not now. It still lacks some key components. We need another week to complete it." Roland shook his head.

"According to the plan you gave to the Ministry of Construction before the unification war, you intend to use the railway to connect the mine to the wharf, right?" Barov asked.

"Yes." Roland sensed that Barov had something else to say.

"Such a powerful vehicle will boost our people's morale and greatly help the City Hall in our war propaganda work," Barov spoke out his idea. "Is it alright to let all your subjects witness this incredible scene on the day of the train's test run?"

Roland immediately understood what kind of propaganda effect Barov wanted to achieve and was pleased to see that his City Hall Director had learned to guide the people's opinion during these years.

"As you wish," he smiled and said.

Chapter 923: A Deliberate Provocation

A shrill alarm rang and grabbed everyone's attention.

"Woo—woo—"

Everyone stood agape.

It was the highest alert again!

Wendy was the first one to recover from the shock. "Your Majesty, please retreat to the castle right now!"

However, Roland did not move since he was greatly surprised by Tilly and Ashes, who came close to him swiftly after hearing the alert. The Extraordinary stood in front of them and Tilly grabbed his wrist.

He felt something as cold as a metal around his wrist.

He looked down and saw the ring on Tilly's finger shining a bright blue light. Obviously, she was ready to fly with him down into the mining area in case of emergency.

Somehow Roland forgot about the danger and focused his mind on Tilly.

Unlike Nightingale who trusted him wholeheartedly, Tilly had not yet recognized him as her brother.

She was too smart to be deceived.

She called him brother just to maintain good relations with him.

In fact, there was still an invisible barrier between them, and because of Tilly's attitude, Ashes always seemed a little restrained in front of him. He was unable to explain to Tilly that what Prince Roland had done to her back in the palace had nothing to do with him. Given that, he had lied to her and never expected much from her. However, now he felt relieved.

He found that he had already won her trust and recognition as an

ally, even if she might still have a doubt about his identity.

"Yes, this place is too close to the city wall at the border. Your Majesty, please leave here as soon as possible!"

"Guards, where are the guards?"

"Come, clear the way for His Majesty!" The officials also came to their senses now and started to shout.

The people's voices, together with the alert, turned the scene into pure chaos.

The noises recalled Roland from his reflections. Seeing such a tense situation, he could not help knitting his eyebrows and thought, "Maybe the frontier guards have already spotted some demons?"

He looked to the west and was lost in thought. "Now that Sylvie is on the watch for demons, the alarm can't be false. And the frontier guards' highest alert must be about the demons. I heard that they should remain dormant for some time since they don't have enough Red Mist. Did their supplies arrive at the Taquila ruins recently?"

He wanted to go to the city wall to have a look personally, but he quickly gave up the idea. He did not want to increase the burden for the frontier guards since Nightingale and the main force of the First Army had not arrived yet.

When they walked down the North Slope Mountain, he summoned Wendy and said to her, "Regardless of the situation, send me any news from the City Wall as soon as you receive it."

"Yes," Wendy promised with a solemn face.

...

Watching the enemies approaching quickly, Sylvie felt her hands were wet.

It was not the first time for her to see demons, but they still made

her feel stressed out.

"One, two, three, four, five, six." She counted the number of the Devilbeasts who were flying toward Neverwinter in a horizontal line. In the Eye of Magic, every detail of the enemies was clearly discernible. Just like Alethea had mentioned, not every Devilbeast took a Mad Demon on its back. Two of them looked just like pack horses and carried bone vessels which looked like bumps on their backs.

She zoomed in and saw the Red Mist surging inside the bumps.

Obviously, they were their mist tanks for this long-distance raid.

But... why are the demons launching an attack so early?

For the moment, they should stay close to the God's Stone mineral vein at the Taquila ruins, waiting for the Bloody Moon.

Sylvie was bewildered by the sudden appearance of the demons. Fortunately, the frontier guards' quick response made her feel relieved. They had already removed the cannon covers and gotten ready for the combat. If the enemies continued to fly in this direction, they would come within the cannons' range in seven or eight minutes.

"Miss Sylvie, someone called to ask which direction the enemies were heading for. And if they plan to enter the city, can you estimate which blocks they will fly over?" The guard who was in charge of communication asked.

In order to transmit the information about the enemies' situation on time, Roland had moved the wind-up telephone prototype, which had been made in the backyard of the North Slope Mountain, to the city wall. Apart from the telephone line linking Neverwinter and Longsong Stronghold, it was the first telephone line in the city. Limited by the length, the telephone at the other end of the line was installed at the entrance of the Third Border City. Roland had arranged two guards to assist Sylvie in

communication and had sent two God's Punishment Witches to protect her.

"Road No.5 or No.9," Sylvie wiped the sweat from her hands. "But they may also fly toward the square. There're still some people left behind."

She was worried that once the Devilbeasts rushed into the crowded market, the consequences would be disastrous.

"I got it." The guard picked up the phone and repeated what Sylvie had to the person at the other end of the telephone line.

"Wait!" Sylvie suddenly raised her voice. "They're ascending!"

"Are they planning to fly over the city wall?" The guard was anxious.

"But they slowed down at the same time. Now the guards on top of the city wall should be able to see them directly."

Before she finished her sentence, she heard the vague noise of gunshots coming through the phone.

The guards of the city wall were elite soldiers of the First Army, who had taken part in the snow mountain exploration. They remained calm at the sight of the demons. Several teams took turns to fire and tried to maintain a low rate of fire in an attempt to conserve bullets.

At this moment, Sylvie noticed a problem.

For the guards, hitting targets in the sky was much harder than shooting down some demonic beasts or God's Punishment Warriors on the ground.

As they were unable to predict the enemies' movements in the sky, they had no idea which angle they should use. As a result, the Devilbeasts remained intact after several rounds of firing and now they were only about 150 meters away from the city wall

They stayed more than 100 meters above the ground and thus the

guards had to lift their barrels to aim at the enemies. The soldiers drastically increased their firing rate, but still failed to hit any target.

At the moment, the Devilbeasts stopped flying forward and hovered in the sky.

The Mad Demons' arms were swelling rapidly.

"No!" Sylvie could not help crying out. "Inform the guards to retreat from the city wall as soon as possible!"

"What?" The guard was confused. "Retreat?"

Unfortunately, it was too late. The demons had already thrown their bone spears. In the blink of an eye, four beams of white light came down to the city wall and struck at the defenseless guards. The wall built by Lotus was unable to protect them from attacks coming from the sky.

Beyond Sylvie's expectation, instead of launching the second round of attacks, the demons only emitted some weird noise after their arms withered and threw several animal skins down. After that, they turned around and flew toward the grassland. That was where they came from.

This sudden attack ended just as suddenly. After a while, they disappeared over the horizon.

Sylvie could not bear to see the situation of the city wall. The guards who got impaled by the bone spears were dead. No matter how hard the other soldiers shook them, they would not open their eyes again. The blood coming from their wounds formed a pool of blood under their bodies.

The animal skins left by the demons were slowly falling through the air, turning out to be pictures.

The most striking one among them was a portrait of a big wolf.

Chapter 924: An Old Trick of the Demons

"What's the meaning of these things?" Roland asked in a deep voice while looking at the animal skins on the table. His face was expressionless.

The demons had launched a surprise attack on the city wall and had left behind a provocative message. However, now was not the time for him to react to this provocation. Furious as he was, he still tried his best to keep control of himself.

The officials nervously glanced at each other, but none of them dared to answer the king's question.

No one wanted to further irritate the enraged king by vocalizing the meaning of the self-explanatory pictures.

Undoubtedly, the big wolf was Lorgar.

The other pictures depicted common people who were down on their knees, a witch who was tied up, a city wall that was on fire, and the ruins of a city littered with corpses respectively.

They looked like quick, crude drawings, but they were still easy to understand.

This series of pictures was a threatening ultimatum.

The demons wanted Neverwinter to hand the Wolf Girl over to them, and they asked the common people to lay down their weapons and surrender. Otherwise, they would totally annihilate the defenders and burn down the city.

Roland glanced around and exhaled deeply, trying to calm himself down. He found that the officials had lost a lot of their fighting spirit, and some of them even looked terrified. Fortunately, none of them tried to advise him to give the witch to the demons.

"Your Majesty, this isn't just a threatening letter from the

demons. It's a trap!" In the middle of this stressful atmosphere, a beam of light suddenly appeared and expanded next to a wall and then Pasha's voice rang in his head. "Sylvie has told me what happened. Never believe anything the demons say. It's another one of their old tricks."

She sounded anxious as if she was worried that the king might make a hasty decision.

Roland immediately comprehended the implications of her statement.

"Did something similar happen to you before?"

"To be exact, it happened to a lord of the common people," Pasha said seriously. "During the first Battle of Divine Will, the demons used this trick to create a divide between the common people and the witches. That was how they nibbled the Land of Dawn away step by step."

The ancient witch continued to explain the "trap".

"During the first Battle of Divine Will, the demons not only acted aggressively on the battleground but also plotted against the witches. They often lured a lord of a city to hand over the witches to them in exchange for postponing the attack on that city. Back then, the common people and the witches lived together peacefully. Though the witches were only a minority, they did not have to hide their abilities. As a result, they could be recognized easily."

"Hoping to survive the war, the cities where the witches were in a weak position usually chose to make a deal with the demons. As a result, many witches who had just returned from the battlefield were caught or executed by people of their own cities. In such a situation, the estrangement between the witches and the common people was gradually aggravated, and then, after a complete betrayal, the witches broke irretrievably with the common people."

"In the middle of the first Battle of Divine Will, two major cities located in the central part of the Land of Dawn built two coalition forces to fight against the demons. One of the coalition forces was controlled by the witches, and the other one was led by and consisted of the common people. During a fierce battle, the common people's army surrendered to the demons all of a sudden. The witches' army withdrew but was besieged by their former ally. The common people even used weapons made of God's Stones of Retaliation to fight them." "The witches were exhausted and had lost more than half of their warriors during the previous battle against the demons. They resisted strongly but still lost. After that, the leaders of the witches were beheaded in public, and the common people sent some of the remaining witches to the demons while enslaving the rest of them."

"The Union named this incident the 'Red Betrayal'. We consider it a profound lesson for us. From that day on, the witches and the common people have grown apart."

"The cities that surrendered to the demons did not survive as long as they had hoped. Forcing the common people to betray the witches was just the first step of the demons' plans. If the demons' outposts were close enough to the cities, they would never hesitate to conquer them. The Lord who initiated the 'Red Betrayal' was no exception. He followed the demons' orders and helped them in building mist storage towers and outposts. He even provided them with intelligence services. However, in the end, he couldn't enjoy his old age in peace. It's said that he was imprisoned in his castle by the demons and was starved to death. There were also some rumors that said that he was killed by a group of vengeful witches when he fled his domain after finding out that the demons planned to eliminate all of humanity. After the first Battle of Divine Will, human beings lost the Land of Dawn and most of our domains became uninhabitable. Since then, the sight of the Red Mist on the horizon had become a lingering nightmare."

"The Witch Union rose from the ashes of this defeat and became the ruler of the Fertile Plains for next few hundred years."

At the end of the story, Roland heard a shocking rumor from Pasha.

"There was also hearsay among the witches in the upper levels of the Union, according to which the demons learned this trick from the human beings themselves."

"What did you say?" Roland asked and then quickly realized that Parsha only told the rumor to him.

All the officials in the hall looked startled, wondering why the king raised such a question.

"It was rumored that long before the beginning of the first Battle of Divine Will, back when the demons were no different from beasts, some person got in contact with them and taught them knowledge," Parsha said in a low voice. "A few people believed that this explained why the Senior Demons looked like human beings, but the Three Chiefs thought it was absolute nonsense and forbade the people from talking about it. As a result, only the witches in the upper level of the Union still remember this rumor."

Roland held his breath and tried to talk to the ancient witch through his mind, "Do you believe it?"

"I'm not sure." To his surprise, Pasha was uncertain about the rumor. "If it's true, then it means that we have to be extremely careful when communicating with the demons."

After a moment of thought, Roland asked Parsha about a specific detail of the rumor. "Was the person in the story a witch or a common person?"

Parsha sighed lightly. "Some people said it was a witch and some said it was a common person."

"What an unreliable rumor," Roland thought.

He agreed with the Three Chiefs of the Union on their decision to stop the rumor. After all, no matter how the demons came about to become the enemy of all of humanity, they still had to guide their followers to defeat them. He changed the subject. "If a lord remained unmoved by the demons' offer, what would they do?"

"They'd keep harassing him, or even send an army to the city to besiege it until the lord surrendered," Pasha said. "This old trick had proven to be very effective in conquering small towns and cities."

"Do you mean to say that the demons will come back again?" Roland sneered. "Barov."

"Yes!" The City Hall Director stood up immediately.

"Soothe the subjects first, and then we'll hold a memorial ceremony for the soldiers who died in combat. It's the best way to raise the spirits of the mourning people." Roland stressed each word with due strength. "As for the demons, I'll let them know that things are different now. This isn't the first Battle of Divine Will anymore."

Chapter 925: The Air Defense System

Roland had mentioned several problems that needed to be solved. The lack of an air defense network was as big of an issue as the transportation problem.

The importance of achieving air supremacy stuck in his head. He had learned this lesson from the history of the wars in his previous world. An army who had the aerial advantage was always able to launch an attack from any point at any time, and before the invention of the radar, no one on the ground was able to detect enemies coming from the vast sky, let alone defeat them. Bearing that in mind, he planned to enhance his army's air defense capabilities as soon as possible. Otherwise, he would never be able to build an artillery position near the Taquila ruins.

He guessed that after Lorgar's escape from their pursuit, the demons had probably had flown to the border of the Western Region several times to investigate, and they would have likely concluded that most of the residents of Neverwinter were common people. That was why they thought they could repeat the old trick that they had used in the first Battle of Divine Will.

The demons' investigation teams had somehow managed to avoid the sentry posts in the Impassable Mountain Range as well as the God's Punishment Witches who had gone deep into the Barbarian Land. If Sylvie had not taken over the scouting job, the frontier guards would not have been able to detect the approaching demons until they came near the city wall.

The battle on the city wall had highlighted what was lacking in the current technology, and proven that the sky had already become the biggest vulnerability in Neverwinter's defensive line.

After all, the people in this era could hardly imagine aerial forces, let alone countermeasures for aerial attacks.

Roland had been pondering over the air defense problem ever

since the moment he had seen the demons with their flying Devilbeasts, but he had never expected them to come to the city so early. He had not started the development of air defense weapons yet, or even finished building the Impassable Mountain ground defense line and the telephone network.

The fact that the frontier guards had not been able to shoot down any demon or Devilbeast during the earlier incident did not surprise him at all. It had been his decision to use revolving rifles to fill up the blind zones of the machine guns and the cannons for now, and they had proven to be quite effective in suppressing enemies on the ground. However, resulting from the low pressure in the bore, a revolving rifle had a relatively short range and a low accuracy, which became a very serious defect against airborne enemies. Furthermore, its hit rate was low and its firepower was limited, since each of its cartridges could only contain five bullets. Last but not least, it had no suitable tripod or aiming tool for targets in the sky. With these defects, it could hardly serve as an ideal ground-to-air weapon.

He felt that he had better begin to replace all the revolving rifles with bolt rifles.

It was already part of his plan, but Anna was unable to mass-produce that many parts that were necessary for the large-scale production of the bolt rifles. Given that, he had only equipped the sniper team with bolt rifles for now. Fortunately, the workers had started to get familiar with the operation of the new machine tool which was put into use recently, and they were already able to assemble rifles on their own. Once they could improve their work efficiency and guarantee the quality of the products, the output of bolt rifles would be substantially increased.

Though bolt rifles could shoot farther and more precisely than revolving rifles, they could hardly serve as ground-to-air weapons. Their rate of fire was even lower than the revolving rifles, and their tracer ammunition, which had a complex structure, was not

easy to manufacture, especially when the ammunition production line was already working at its full capacity. Even if he began to focus on tackling the key problems for the mass production of bolt rifles now, he would need several months to achieve this goal. By the time he succeeded, the Months of Demons would already be over.

Under these circumstances, he decided to create new ground-to-air firearms as the primary air defense weapons and use the bolt rifles to assist these new weapons in a fight.

Based on the existing technologies, he was not able to equip his army with any kind of high-tech fire control system, so his only choice was to create a hail of bullets to stop the enemies in the sky.

The easiest way of achieving this effect was to convert some of the Mark I type heavy machine guns into anti-aircraft machine guns, which had been a tried and tested solution in the modern world's history and would not increase the burden on the manufacturing and logistics sectors. A Mark I type HMG equipped with an aiming tool and an adjustable tripod would be able to shoot low-flying enemies out of the sky.

In any case, his Mark I type heavy machine guns were easy to convert, as he had planned for the air defense usage in advance and had equipped them with air-cooled barrels instead of a water-cooled casing when designing these machine guns.

A heavy machine gun was well-suited for hitting long-range targets, while also having a remarkably high hit rate at shorter ranges. It fired its shells extremely fast, and thus had overwhelming firepower. With these features, they could effectively suppress the spear-throwing Mad Demons who rode the flying Devilbeasts. If the city wall had been equipped with two such converted Mark I type machine guns before the previous skirmish, the outcome would have been very different.

With this plan in mind, after he concluded the meeting, he

immediately headed for the Arithmetic Academy instead of returning to his office.

This new academy was located to the south of the Castle District, next to the chemistry laboratory. Most of the researchers working in the academy were the former Astrology Association members. Being venerated as a school of sages, it had recently been attracting quite a lot of the talented citizens who had just completed their primary schooling. It received almost 20% more job applications than the Alchemist Workshop next door.

Roland speculated that the frequent explosions and accidents in the lab might also have played a part in discouraging prospective job applicants.

Astrologer of Dispersion Star welcomed him in the main hall.

After bowing to the king, the Chief Astrologer began heaping praise upon the profoundness and beauty of mathematics.

"Your Majesty, please forgive me for nagging you. That book you gave me, 'Analytical Geometry', must the deities' work! I had never imagined that I'd be able to see the world so clearly with my mind instead of my eyes. Even if I were to one day become dim-sighted from old age and lose the ability to observe the starry sky, I would still be able to describe the world just as clearly as before. For example, now I can even describe your wavy hair, your clothes, and even your boots using numbers and symbols..."

Fearing that he would go on and on, Roland interrupted him. "Have you mastered all the knowledge in the book?"

"I can't say I've mastered all of it, but I did master most of it." Dispersion Star calmed himself down and continued. "In the past six months, apart from the calculation missions you gave us, we've been working on a huge project. We recorded the stars' celestial coordinates and our previous observation results in the mathematical language. Now we can be sure that the Star of Extinction, the Bloody Moon in your words, always stays at the

same spot in the sky. It doesn't move at all."

Roland had once paid close attention to the Bloody Moon, whose coming was said to herald the beginning of the Battle of Divine Will. Now that the demons had already begun to take action, he no longer had any interest in the star.

"I've come to give you a new mission. You'd better finish it as soon as possible." He said explicitly. "It's not a pure math problem like the previous missions. You need to solve a practical problem for the First Army."

"Do you mean creating something like the cannons' firing table?"

"It's more complicated than that," Roland shook his head and said. "You need to work with the craftsmen to produce a tool which can predict the movement of a target in the sky. You'll need two equations to describe this kind of movement. One describes the horizontal displacement of the target and the other describes the vertical displacement. I have a general idea of the design, but you have to determine the specific parameters through more detailed measurement and calculation."

What Roland wanted was an aiming tool for the new ground-to-air machine guns that could determine a target's distance and forward direction in the sky. With these parameters, a soldier could adjust the weapon to get the proper high angle and advance angle, and then riddle the flying enemy with bullets. This aiming tool was a manually operated mechanical device rather than a piece of electronic equipment, so all that the shooter needed to operate this weapon would be an accurate firing table and some basic knowledge of mathematics and geometry.

Chapter 926: Quitting Math for Dummies

The anti-aircraft machine guns were just the first step to enhancing Neverwinter's air defense capabilities. The most effective way to protect the city's airspace was still building a functional air force.

Back in the days when the Union had ruled the human world, witches had guarded the skies.

A small number of witches endowed with a flying ability, as well as a few Extraordinaries wearing Stones of Flight, had performed this air defense task. They had been recognized as the strongest warriors of the Union, and thus their status had been higher than that of the other combat witches in the Blessed Army. According to Pasha, throughout the history of the Union, all the Three Chiefs had always been former members of this air defense troop.

As for the common people who did not have the talent to use magic power or the Magic Stones, the only solution was to create a kind of machine which could serve as their wings. When that happened, they would be able to get rid of the constraints of gravity and fly up into the sky.

In order to dominate the battle in the air, Neverwinter had to build up its own air forces.

To achieve that goal, Roland needed to create airplanes.

This was no easy job, as it involved tackling many technical problems at the same time. He was not familiar with aircraft design, and even the structure of a biplane from World War I was complicated enough to give him a headache. He was able to get away with the simplified power transmission systems and braking systems of the train for the initial prototype. However, the flight control surfaces of a plane could not be half-assed and had a much lower tolerance for error. More importantly, he had never flown a plane and thus had no idea whether the mechanical devices he

created would work or not.

Fortunately, he could choose another kind of aircraft—the glider.

Wendy, who was able to sense wind direction and wind power accurately, could work as his test pilot. With the help of Lightning and Maggie, who could ensure Wendy's safety, he believed he would be able to write a flight manual for the operation of the gliders without risking anyone's life.

"Your Majesty." Astrologer of Dispersion Star spoke, interrupting Roland's thoughts. "I understand what you mean. The Arithmetic Academy will make this aiming tool for you as soon as possible."

"Good." Roland nodded in satisfaction. He was happy to be able to talk to this astrologer, who could immediately understand his intentions. He felt that it had really been a wise decision to bring the whole Astrology Association to the Western Region.

As a school of sages, the Astrology Association also required hands-on practical ability just as the alchemists did. The astrologers were not only excellent at mathematics but also good with their hands. Since no blacksmith knew how to make a telescope, they usually designed and assembled the telescope parts by themselves.

Just as Roland was about to leave, he noticed that Astrologer of Dispersion Star still seemed to have something to say.

"Is there anything else?" Roland asked.

"Here's a thing I can't figure out, Your Majesty." The scholar cleared this throat by coughing several times. "I don't understand why there's the word 'Intermediate' on the cover of the book, 'Analytic Geometry', and on every cover of the mathematics books you gave me."

Roland chuckled. "That's the thing you want to ask?"

"Please forgive me for being so bold, if it's a thing can't be disclosed." Different from Kyle Sichi, Dispersion Star had stayed in

the old King's City since his birth. He had served several kings and was always on his best behavior. However, Roland could tell from his eyes that he was just as curious as the Chief Alchemist.

Roland could not help but smile while recalling that he had used "Intermediate Chemistry" to lure Kyle into working for Neverwinter. In order to get his hands on the book, Kyle had recruited students, given lectures, and even taken up the post of Minister of Chemical Industry. Nevertheless, Roland felt that he would not need to repeat this carrot-and-stick trick on Dispersion Star.

He explained plainly, "It's because there's a book called Advanced Mathematics. It's not just about geometry or arithmetics. It's advanced mathematical theory. You can imagine the primary and intermediate books as the trunk of a tree and advanced mathematics as the top of the tree. But this book is much harder to understand, so it has another name."

"What might that be?"

"Quitting Math for Dummies," Roland answered with his hands laid out in a shrug.

Obviously, Dispersion Star did not understand Roland's implication. He stared blankly at the king, and then he said, "Your, Your Majesty... I'll never give up, even if I have to spend the rest of my life to grasp the theory! Could you please show me..."

Seeing the sincere look on the scholar's face, Roland somehow felt a little embarrassed about himself, since he had regularly dozed off in his advanced mathematics class. He cleared his throat and said, "Of course. After finishing this project, you may come to the castle to get the book."

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Dispersion Star knelt and replied with excitement.

...

After that, Roland left the Mathematics Academy for the backyard of the North Slope Mountain.

Apart from the anti-aircraft machine guns, he intended to make some special weapons for the God's Punishment Witches.

After having spent several months together, he was firmly convinced about the Taquila survivors' burning desire to wreak havoc upon the demons. Neverwinter had to fight the demons to survive, but the Taquila witches just wanted revenge. In the hearts of the ancient witches, the demons had been the source of their pains for the past hundreds of years, the enemies who had killed their families and friends, and the nightmare they longed to get rid of.

Roland felt that it would be a complete waste for these mighty warriors to use only swords and spears to fight the demons. He also noticed that they were able to fight with weapons that were too heavy to carry for conventional soldiers. This meant that he could equip them with fiercer firearms and turn them into high mobility heavy battle units.

His initial plan was to design a portable Mark I type HMG for the God's Punishment Witches, whose ammo box could be carried in their backpacks. With these weapons, the God's Punishment Witches would become mobile fortresses. Once they encountered a pack of demons, they could immediately turn them into Swiss cheese.

However, now he had changed his mind.

Some heavy machine guns were going to be converted into anti-aircraft machine guns, and a new variant of the Mark I guns would soon begin production on a large scale. In the near future, the bullet consumption speed would be incredibly fast, but based on the current efficiency of Neverwinter's bullet production, he could not ensure the supply of ammunition for so many guns. Under such circumstances, even if he were to manufacture 300 guns for

the God's Punishment Witches, they would not get enough bullets to be able to achieve the target effect of a walking fortress

To solve this problem, he needed to create a powerful and simple weapon that used fewer bullets while also being easy to maintain.

He quickly sketched the outline of the new weapon on paper.

It was a grapeshot gun, a gas operated weapon with a 40mm caliber.

The prominent advantage of a grapeshot gun was its wide killing range and the long-distance shots resulting from the enlarged caliber. It shot automatically and its shooter did not have to be very accurate. It could help the revolving rifles and bolt rifles in suppressing the enemies who managed to break through the cannon blockade line. It could also be adopted in a sneak attack. In such a battle, the grapeshot gun shooter could take the initiative to approach the target.

Judging from the demons' fighting methods in the second Battle of Divine Will, they were still in the era of cold weapons. In a direct encounter, they usually fought hand to hand instead of throwing spears.

Given that, Roland was confident that the God's Punishment Witches equipped with automatic grapeshot guns would be able to give them hell in a close combat fight.

...

Five days later, Sylvie spotted some Devilbeasts again.

The number of enemies had doubled this time. Twelve Devilbeasts, looking like a dark cloud in the sky, were flying towards Neverwinter.

Chapter 927: Air Defense Battle At The Border (Part I)

Roland had added two short telephone lines connecting his office with the command center of the Neverwinter garrison and the Taquila survivors so that both stations could instantly contact him if the need arises. Therefore, the castle, the camp of the First Army, and the Third Border City received the news almost at the same time.

"This happened too soon." Pasha was a little doubtful. "Based on our experience, we should have had half a month or even a month before the demons would launch their second attack; especially for a city like Neverwinter since they can't arrive in one day."

"Why?" Roland asked.

"Because they need time to let the panic spread. By that time, no matter how the lord of the city tries to calm his subjects, it will be all for naught. The second attack would crush the people's confidence and snuff out any remaining hope. That's why they normally waited for some time before commenced the second attack." Pasha explained. "The demons seem a bit hasty this time."

"I see." Roland nodded. Pasha was right. In an ancient city, people were too busy working every day just to feed themselves every day. In such a disconnected society incomparable to the one where Roland came from, five days were only long enough for the news to spread among the Rats and the patrons of a few taverns.

Somehow, the old rumor seemed a bit more credible to Roland now. After all, the demons' strategy was so similar to the humans'. It was highly unlikely for them to act so human-like without a human guiding them.

"What are you going to do?" Alethea chimed in.

"What else can I do? Just kill them all!" Roland said decisively.

Time seemed very limited. They had only managed to add the new aiming tool on the Mark I HMG recently, and the machine gun squad they hastily assembled only had one trial, with balloons as the targets. But since many witches, including Nightingale, Lightning, and Maggie, had returned, they could now take the initiative to attack.

Roland looked at Nightingale and the other witches. "Just follow the plan. Remember the most important thing is..."

"Safety. Lightning perfectly understands!" The little girl raised her hand.

"Maggie too, coo!"

"Don't worry. I'll take care of these two little ones," Nightingale said, smiling.

"Who's the little one?" Lightning protested, raising her chin.

"Of course it's you, coo."

"Why?"

"I'm bigger than the two of you combined after transforming! Coo!" Maggie spread her wings.

"That's not what I meant!"

The two hadn't even finished arguing before Nightingale picked them both, one girl in each arm, and went out of the meeting room.

"I'll leave the defense task of the city wall to the witches of the Sleeping Island," Roland said to Tilly.

Tilly answered without hesitation, "They'll do their best."

"Good. Then I shall stand by the phone and wait for your good news," Roland said and then commanded word by word, "Move! Now!"

Pasha did not speak until Roland was alone in the room. Her

voice sounded serious. "Are you serious about this? The demons would change their mind once they spot so many witches, and they won't see Neverwinter as a city ruled by the common person but by witches. They would then have completely different tactics in store for us."

"I know. You've already warned me about that." Roland exhaled softly. The ancient witch had told him about her concern when they made the defense plan. In her opinion, if the demons thought Neverwinter was a Holy City under the dominion of the Union, they would undoubtedly strengthen their defenses and attack with increasing aggression in the coming battles. In other words, they would start to view Neverwinter as an even opponent. The demons only took the witches seriously and completely disregarded the common people.

"I thought... humans would prefer to avoid a war like this."

"They'll come sooner or later, right?" Roland arose and walked up to the French window, and looked off into the direction of the border. "Since that's the case, it's better to fight a battle we have prepared for instead of heading mindlessly to war. The First Army is made up of men who used to be common hunters, miners, and farmers, and the army was not exceptionally powerful in the beginning. Now that they have to face an enemy that is not in the least like the ones they faced before, every chance of confrontation would help them gain experience and prepare them for the Battle of Divine Will. The so-called elite soldiers are simply those who have survived several times on the edge of life and death."

"I must say that your resolve has moved me." Alethea whisked her tentacles. "You're better than most of the common people just from this point."

Roland shook his head and said, "Common people didn't earn the label of 'common people' because they're incompetent, but simply because of their large population. Therefore, their strength is often easily ignored. There're stories in the Dream World telling of tales

where powerful entities, whether they be ancient gods or colossal dragons, underestimated the might of the humans, and ended up being slaughtered by mere 40 ordinary people."

"I have never heard of such a legend."

"But they're not entirely false. I dare say that as technology advance, we will only need 25 common people to do the same job." Roland shrugged. Then he turned around and said seriously, "Furthermore, we can mislead the demons by letting them believe that Neverwinter is a city ruled by the Union. They will conclude that the bizarre attacks they're about to suffer are from the witches abilities and ignore the most important point—Neverwinter is neither a city ruled by a common lord nor one under the Union's rule. It is is an industrialized city that has managed to merge the essence of both."

Fish Ball widened his eyes, and stared unblinkingly at the grassland to the North, so as not to miss any sign of the enemies.

He had heard of the existence of the demons from His Majesty a year ago, but the first time he saw what they looked like was during the incident five days ago.

When he witnessed the scene of the enemies' bone spears piercing through his fellow soldiers' chests, Fish Ball felt the dread he had not felt for a long time flood back over him. No human beings could attack like that. Even the demonic beasts could not threaten the city wall with that huge distance between them and the wall. For the first time since he joined the army, he met an enemy whose range of attack was comparable to that of the flintlocks. However, he failed to strike back due to the limited angle range of his weapon, which made him a conspicuous target to the enemies if he had held his ground on the wall.

At that moment, Fish Ball wanted to run away.

But he stayed his ground. It was, at first, his trained reflexes kicking in that prevented him from fleeing, but then, a strong feeling of fury and detestation flooded over him. He was furious about the previous deaths of his companions and his powerlessness.

He used to be a wimp that was known for his cowardly nature to people in the old Border Town. People laughed at him wherever he went, and for a time, he nearly believed that he was a real coward. But that all changed the day Van'er had tricked him to join the then-new Militia with two eggs. In the first confrontation with the demonic beasts on the wall, he was so scared that he peed his pants, but ever since he returned from the wall that day, no one had laughed at him anymore.

Now, Van'er was already promoted to the head of Artillery Battalion, yet he was merely transferred from the Flintlock Squad to the Machine Gun Squad and became a squad captain. Fish Ball had neither gripe nor jealousy, for he knew that Van'er was much more capable than him. Van'er even had guts to speak in front of His Majesty, and that was something he would never dare do. But that did not mean that he did not want to be a better person.

Ever since he decided to serve His Majesty, he had witnessed things far beyond his imagination. He had traveled on a concrete ship that could make its way upstream without sails, and he had attacked the nobles' capital city. He had also helped defeat the arrogant Church of Hermes and claimed the desert of the south in Graycastle for his King.

He had already seen so many things. So why should he be afraid of the demons?

Suddenly the observer shouted, "Attention. Suspicious targets spotted at 10 o'clock!"

In the same instant, Fish Ball also noticed some indistinct black spots on the horizon.

He pulled off the rifle bolt of the Mark I and raised its muzzle towards the sky.

No one knew that he was still ashamed of what had happened five days ago.

Only the blood of the enemies could help him was this disgraceful memory away.

Chapter 928: Air Defense Battle At The Border (Part II)

"Targets confirmed. The demons are coming!"

"They're heading this way!"

"They're coming from two directions. Demons also spotted at 12 o'clock!"

The observers of the different squads took turns watching their targets through the telescope, giving warnings continuously. Fish Ball's eyes were glued to the second group of enemies that appeared in the shooting area he was assigned to.

The demons in his field of vision were tiny as the leaves flying in the wind, and only when the devilbeast flapped its wings could they tell the difference between them and regular birds. Having learned by heart the firing procedures, Fish Ball placed one of the demons in his aiming reticule and then adjusted the heading indicator of the aiming tool.

The new aiming tool on top of the gun looked very odd. It contained two concentric rings: One was equipped with a Devilbeast model that could spin; the other consisted of several paratactic tiny holes that could rotate with the model.

Fish Ball knew nothing about the principles behind this aiming tool, but he knew that since His Majesty had designed it, it would be as fabulous as any of the other ingenious things the King had made. He spent a whole night memorizing every step he needed to go through before firing the weapon. The first step, he remembered, was to move the heading indicator, the Devilbeast model, to where it was parallel with the target.

In a short amount of time, the enemy in the air was aligned with the tiny hole in the aiming ring.

Right after that, he glanced at the model and shouted to his

partner beside him, "A quarter!"

That meant the area of the target to that of the model was four to one, indicating that the demon was in the shooting range of the Mark I HMG.

Lord Astrologer of the Dispersion Star, who assisted in training the squads, had hammered it into them that any distances judged by the naked eye were bound to result in inaccuracies; it could only serve as a rough estimate of the range to the enemy. To ensure maximum effectiveness of the Mark I, it would be safer for them to round the distance up.

That sounded easy enough for Fish Ball to understand. A premature spray from the Mark I would be guaranteed to hit the target while firing too late might just waste bullets.

After making the call, Fish Ball only needed to wait for his partner to find the corresponding number on the shooting table before he would pull the trigger.

It only took a few seconds to finish this procedure, but the process felt excruciatingly long to him. As this was happening, everything around Fish Ball seemed to slow down for him, and the shouting sounds of his fellow soldiers in the background started to fade away. For a moment, he even heard his own rapid heartbeats and heavy breathing clearly.

He could feel a slight amount of moisture in his palms. He knew that the cowardly Fish Ball was still inside him somewhere.

But that only helped him steel himself for what was to come.

As the demons flew steadily towards the wall, they gradually rose, going for the same pattern they executed five days ago. Now that they were at least 800 or 900 meters away, they fully extended their wings so that their bodies were as stretched out as possible. This made them such thin targets that even marksmen of the sniper team would be able to guarantee a clean shot on them.

"But we are different," Fish Ball thought.

The scholar had told him of many principles, most of which was beyond Fish Ball's understanding. But he had remembered one point very clearly.

"Once the enemies are close enough to throw spears, you're free to aim and fire. But before they get in that range, you don't need to worry about hitting the enemies but rather just send as many bullets as you can in their path and wait for them to fly into the bullets."

"Use the fifth hole!" At this moment, his squadmate behind him shouted.

Fish Ball took a deep breath and raised the muzzle, "placing" the Mad Demon that he was aiming at in the fifth hole and pulled the trigger as hard as he could.

Suddenly, a gush of flame flashed out of the muzzle.

The sound of gunfire was ear-piercing, and it seemed to have resumed the flow of time which had previously appeared to slow down. Almost simultaneously, the other squads had also started to open fire. The area atop the city wall instantly heated up.

This all felt rather bizarre to Fish Ball.

The muzzle of the Mark I was not aimed at the demons but a vacant space in front of them. No one knew if they would hit the target. All they could do was keep their fingers tightly on the trigger, and pray for the best as the cartridge box was emptied one bullet after another.

Fortunately, this did not last long.

After three seconds or so, a "flower" of red bloomed among the group of demons at their 12 o'clock.

Along with the explosion of red, Fish Ball could also see a half-broken wing and body parts flying everywhere.

The Devilbeast that had been shot were jolted and spun in mid-air, like pieces of thin paper being crumpled up. It was only then that Fish Ball got a rough view of the demon's appearance. However, from the scattering limbs, he did not spot any body parts resembling those of the Mad Demons. This unlucky devilbeast must have been one of the ones who were responsible for carrying the red mist canisters.

Subsequently, two Devilbeasts swayed away midair and dropped down like stones. Fish Ball could not tell from their movement whether they had been urgently dodging the bullets or seriously injured. But they failed to recover their speed and smashed directly onto the grassland.

Apparently, the sight inspired the soldiers, who started to cheer rapturously.

"And another one! Partner, well done!"

"Air Defense Squad, it's all yours now!"

"Come on, kill those nasty things!"

"Long live King Roland!"

The demons seemed to sense something wrong. They started to disperse and accelerate, charging towards the wall without any sign of retreat!

"Three fourths!" Fish Ball grabbed the gun handle tightly and kept adjusting the shooting direction. "No... four fourths!"

The enemy in his vision was the same size as the model, meaning that the enemy was now within spear-chucking range.

"Open Fire!" the observator shouted, "All gunners, fire at will!"

The soldiers armed with revolving rifles also joined and opened up at the approaching devilbeasts.

All the guns were blasting away, cracking continuously at the wall. Four devilbeasts were already shot down, however, ever since

the enemies became aware of their attack and started to dodge the shots, few bullets succeeded in hitting them. At this moment, Fish Ball noticed a Devilbeast dart through the sky and dove towards him. As the deformed monster was snarling down at him from the air, he could faintly see that the Mad Demon on raised up a bone spear and aimed it at him.

A piercing chill instantly rose from the soles of his feet, crept through his body, and caused his hands to tremble involuntarily.

Now that the demon in his vision was bigger than the model, he didn't have to estimate how far the demon was anymore, for this distance was short enough for the bullet fired by Mark I to maintain a perfectly straight trajectory through the air. All he needed to do now was to raise the muzzle, aim, and keep firing until the demon's body was riddled with bullets.

But, that spear would also pierce through his body without mercy.

Flee or die.

The familiar feeling crawled up like a shadow, and the cowardly Fish Ball seemed to have grabbed him by his hands.

"Ah———" In the next moment, Fish Ball bellowed, "Go away. I'm no longer———!"

At the same instant, the barrel of the gun spat out flames of death toward the demon.

The bullets released from the gun whistled toward the demon, tore through its muscles, shattered its bones, and ricocheted in the demon's body before exiting the other side. The impact was so intense that its body swelled a little as its guts were smashed to smithereens.

The Mad Demon threw the bone spear at the moment the bullets flew into him.

Fish ball had foreseen his ending when he pulled the trigger.

But he did not let go of his finger. He stood firm even though he was trembling violently with fear.

"—a coward!"

Bang!

Just one meter away in front of Fish ball, the shadow-like bone spear shattered as it flew into a semi-transparent barrier that had appeared out of nowhere. The barrier only shook a little but otherwise remained intact.

Fish Ball finally came to himself and realized that a short-haired and short witch had appeared on the battlements, and blocked the spear with her incredible power.

"What are you shouting for?" She let out a long breath and slowly withdrew her hands. Then she turned around and smiled at him. "Of course you aren't."

Chapter 929: Air Defense Battle At The Border (Part III)

Sylvie, who was observing the battle, could finally breathe out a sigh of relief. The Mad Demons' first volley this time did not cause as much damage as compared with their previous attack. With the help of the witches of the Sleeping Island, the spears were either blocked or strangely missed their targets. Only one spear managed to hit a heavy machine gun and shatter it, blasting the splinters everywhere. The explosion forced the squad to cease fire temporarily, but none of the soldiers were fatally wounded. Nana would be able to heal them all as long as they held on until the end of the battle.

The Mad Demons had to let their swollen arms recover before they could attack again, while the First Army could just keep firing. The longer the demons stayed in one spot, the easier a target they became for the First Army gunners. Sylvies knew then that the enemies' defeat was inevitable.

The demons seemed to sense that too. As a horn rang out, the surviving Devilbeasts scrambled to turn around and accelerated away towards the west.

Compared to the evasive movements the devilbeasts displayed when attacking, the beeline they made in the air after turning tails turned them into easy targets for the soldiers. The hail of bullets managed to snap off one escaping Devilbeast's wing. The beast then fell into the Misty Forest with its body bent in an odd angle.

By now, there were only five flying Devilbeasts left, and only three carried the Mad Demons.

Sylvie informed the last of the Neverwinter attackers, who were currently lying in ambush about this information through the Sigil of Listening.

They were the last nail in the coffin for these demons.

"Copy that," said a familiar voice from the other end of the Sigil. "I'm on it. Enjoy the show of a great explorer!"

"Be careful..." Before Sylvie could even finish, sounds of wind whooshing past already blocked out the rest of her words.

That was a signal of falling from the high sky, and an omen of death for the enemies.

The last thing the demons controlling the devilbeasts expected was that someone would attack them from above. They were proud of their natural ability to strike from the air. However, in the face of the witches above the clouds, the odds were not in their favor this time.

Lightning accelerated so fast that the goggles started to crack.

120 kilometers per hour!

That's almost twice as fast as Maggie in the Devilbeast form.

If she flew any faster, the turbulent airflow would very likely blow away her wind goggles.

What she needed to do now was no different than what she did to blow up the king's city.

Adjusting the horizontal direction of the "bomb" so that it would hit the flying demons.

But, the "bomb" she carried this time was Ashes.

It was a tentative decision to add an Extraordinary in the battle. Ashes could fly with the help of the Stone of Flight, but she could not fight while she was controlling the stone. It would be a waste to leave such a mighty warrior on the ground, so they finally came to a solution where the little girl would carry Ashes to attack the enemies. This operation turned out to be surprisingly smooth. Ashes could keep floating in the air by her will so that she would not be a burden to Lightning, and at the same time, the

Extraordinary's body was strong enough to bear the violent airflow due to high-speed flight.

As they broke through the thick clouds, their vision suddenly cleared up.

The five Devilbeasts Sylvie had told them about appeared in front of them.

The enemies were still unaware of what was happening above them.

Lightning mustered all her strength and threw Ashes towards one of them.

Ashes unsheathed her long sword and slashed at the demon head-on.

It was not until the demon had heard the blade whistling through the air did it finally become aware of the danger that was fast approaching. But by then, it was too late. The demon swelled its arm and put the spear in an attempt parry the strike, but Ashes' slash was unstoppable. Her sword cut through the spear before cleaving the demon in half. The last thing the demon saw was the Extraordinary's pair of golden eyes.

The rest of the demons were startled, and they screamed out as they made their devilbeats swerve to the sides. They all raised the spear, ignoring the Devilbeast whose master had just been slaughtered. At that moment, a terrifying roar distracted them.

"Woo——Ooo——!"

The giant Devilbeast that Maggie had transformed into dashed out of the thick clouds and swooped towards the demons.

The enemies could not help but put their focus on the gigantic Maggie instead of Ashes. They knew that it was not a real Devilbeast, for they could see a witch on its back.

Two spears hurled by the demons sped towards Maggie like a pair

of shadows.

The next second, the Devilbeast suddenly vanished and the spears passed through thin air. The demons then saw a white pigeon floating proudly where the Devilbeast had been.

"Coo!"

Just in a flash, Nightingale showed up in front of the enemies.

Although the peculiarness of the misty world had restricted her movement in the air so that she could not act as freely as she could on the ground, she would not let any enemy within one "flash" escape.

As long as the enemy was pulled in the misty world, Nightingale would dominate the battle.

Without God's Stones of Retaliation, the demon would never see her. The Devilbeast' narrow back was as large as a town square to her.

While Nightingale shot down the demon with her revolver, she pulled the reins on the devilbeast that is now masterless and had it crash into the last devilbeast still with a rider. The Mad Demon atop the last beast attempted a desperate struggle and threw two spears towards NighTingale while paralyzing its own arm. As the Magic Stone was flashing blue, it did not only drain the demon's magic power but also made half of its body wither up.

Nightingale, however, did not even dodge the spears. She merely turned the black and white world upside down so that the sky became the ground, she then stood on the abdomen of the Devilbeast who, instead, took the spear for her.

The turbulent misty world also concealed Nightingale and her mount. Then abruptly, the Devilbeast, controlled by Nightingale, smashed into the last pair of the enemies.

The misty world absorbed the demon in instantly.

This was a strange world for the demon, and the distorted space and lighting of this world instantly distracted it. By the time the demon realized what had happened, the borderlines that were fine as silver yarn flooded over it like a tsunami.

When the enemies reappeared, both the Devilbeasts and the Mad Demon had been minced into pieces, and their remains showered down to the ground below.

Maggie re-transformed into the beast and quickly caught Nightingale who was falling, while Lightning flew to catch Ashes, who had finished dealing with the other Devilbeast.

"Two to one, I win." Nightingale showed two fingers to the Extraordinary.

Ashes shrugged without a comment.

After they landed safely on the ground, Lightning produced the Sigil of Listening from her bag. "Sylvie, can you find the other two escaped Devilbeasts?"

There was a moment of silence before Lightning heard the answer. "Yes, I see them. They are about 2,500 meters away to the Northeast of you."

"Great, please guide me there."

"You want to go alone?"

"No, Maggie'll go with me. Don't worry," Lightning said as she clapped her chest. "They're just two beasts without a master."

"Noone will escape!" Maggie returned to a pigeon, fluttered to the top of the little girl, and said with her erect bird head.

"Be careful with the red mist cans. Remember not to come into contact with the mist." Nightingale warned.

"Retreat immediately if you see any new enemies," Ashes added.

"Got it. You can count on me!" Lightning raised a thumb and took off with Maggie, heading to where the enemies were fleeing.

Chapter 930: A Letter from the City Hall

After waiting by the telephone for an hour and a half, Roland finally received the final battle report.

The witches who were responsible for the ambush did not let any demons escape, and they also seized a lot of cans containing the red mist. Also, they acquired the corpses of the enemies shot down by the air defense squad, and Leaf also captured the final surviving Mad Demon was wandering around the Misty Forest. All in all, they had gained more from this battle than he had expected.

First, and most importantly, the victory had boosted First Army's morale. The battle had let them realize that even though the demons were not an enemy that could be easily defeated like the knights or wild demonic beasts, they at least had the power to fight back. The demons that everyone had heard so much of was not supernatural and fearsome as the characters narrated in the old stories. In terms of defense, the demons, who were flesh and blood like human beings, were no better than the God's Punishment Army in front of His Majesty's powerful firearms.

Second, the captured enemy would make the anti-demon propaganda in Neverwinter much more effective. Roland believed that once the migrants saw what the demons looked like, they would no longer discriminate against the witches; it was impossible for the demons, a kind of monster that shared none of the similarities with humankind, to brainwash the witches' minds and make the witches their servants.

Lastly, the corpses of the demons would also be quite useful. For research purposes.

Since the magic blood could not save up separately and would lose its power quickly after the host had died, Roland had not counted on applying the enemy's blood to new sigils. But Celine had volunteered to take on the job of making sigils in Agatha's

absence. Celine told him that Agatha was indeed among the most outstanding in the entire Quest Society, but the knowledge of sigil making was essential to every formal member of the society.

She also stressed that apart from the quality of the Magic Stones and demon blood, the appropriate method of carving the vessels on the stone was also crucial to making a good sigil, albeit it being a less important factor. One could directly use a stick to draw a straight line if the time was limited, but carving intricate patterns on the stone would be able to fully bring its power into play.

She was proud to say that no hands could be more exquisite and precise than her tentacles. In terms of sense of touch, control of strength, and not to mention the numerical advantage, the human hand was no match against her tentacles.

As Celine goes on bragging about her tentacles, strange ideas kept popping up in Roland's mind, and it took him a long while before he could get back to reality. Fortunately, Celine could not read his thoughts when their minds were communicating. Otherwise, there would be no way for him to explain himself out of this.

But of course, there was also the bad news.

It turned out that the anti-air effectiveness of the Mark I type HMG was mostly unsatisfactory. By looking at the overview of the battle, Roland found that the hail of bullets fired when the enemies were closer to the wall was the most deadly. The demons, at first, did not expect that they would be attacked, so they flew in slowly cramped up into two tight formations. This made them perfect targets for the guns. However, out of the twelve devil beasts that came, only four were shot down by the guns. After the demons changed the tactic and started to disperse as they entered the effective range for the Mad Demon's spears, no bullets succeeded in bringing any of them down.

Fortunately, the demons' ideal range of spear throwing was about 200 meters, a distance short enough for the bullets of Mark I to

keep a straight trajectory. After three more Devilbeasts were hit, the rest of the demons stopped fighting and retreated immediately. However, if the enemies' attacking range was farther, or if they chose to approach the walls in a more spread out formation, this battle would have been much harder to win.

After all, in the face of the enemies that could maneuver freely in the air, the disadvantages of the immobile defenders on the ground were apparent.

Roland would try to improve the Mark I after this, but there were limited things he could do with the design. He might add a protective steel plate around the gun or convert the guns into small forts to protect the gunners. Also, he would increase the production of Mark I to deal with the war after the Bloody Moon arrives. However, Roland understood that there was no way for them to eliminate the Devilbeasts' threat unless Neverwinter had a comparable air force.

But let him put the concern aside for now. Roland put down the quill and let out a long breath. Finally, he won the air defense battle. No matter how insignificant it was, the battle would be regarded as the first battle in the human history that was won with the help of firearms.

At the thought of that, Roland sent for Barov Mons.

"Hold a celebration ceremony in the central square tonight. Make it as good and as lively as possible as the ones we have on Victory Day. It'll be a part of the propaganda. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Barov responded with a hand on his chest.

Five days after the ceremony, Snaketooth received a letter from the City Hall.

"Who was knocking?" Tigerclaw slurred behind him. "Don't we rest today?"

"Don't worry. It's not the foreman. Just go back to sleep."

Snaketooth returned to the low table and craned his head to look out of the window. The Sun had barely set, and there was still a faint trace of light outside as if a misty veil covered the sky.

Snaketooth had been sleepy when he was awakened, but he could not be soberer now. Seeing the City Hall's red seal on the envelope, he vaguely knew what was in it.

His life had changed significantly in the past a year and a half. After he moved in Border Town, he no longer had to live a rat-like life. Instead, he, like most people, started to make a living by himself. But, still, he had not believed such things would happen to him until he got his first pay, for he was so, so familiar with hirers who were notorious for exploiting their workers. Those corrupt people would cheat workers out of receiving their wages. This was especially so for a worker like him, who was a migrant. However, on the contrary, he got a full pay every month.

So, now he couldn't even imagine how much his life would continue to improve in the days to come.

With a salary of 12 silver royals per month, he could save up one odd gold royal for a down payment on the cheapest house in the residential area of Neverwinter. And if he took a part-time job, he might be able to buy the house much earlier. Now that he was clear about how long it would take him to achieve his goal, he started to look forward to it.

As His Majesty's promises to the people were getting realized one after another, Snaketooth started to hope for more.

Snaketooth carefully unsealed the letter and poured all the contents onto the table. There were three pieces of paper of different sizes and colors.

The first piece was the thickest and palm-sized, with only a few words on it, but it made his heart thud.

Without any doubt, it was an identity card of a formal Neverwinter citizen.

Unlike the temporary card, this card was wrapped up by a transparent and hard film that gave a smooth touch. On it read not only his name and the day of his birth but also a vivid portrait of him.

Finally, he had become a member of this city, and a subject that was acknowledged by the King.

Snaketooth tried to compose himself before he looked at the second piece of paper.

It was a written notice. There were many paragraphs he could not fully understand, as he was only able to spend limited time on night classes since coming to Neverwinter, but he was able to grasp the general idea of the content.

As he had expected, his application for participating the railway construction in the Misty Forest was passed by the City Hall.

Chapter 931: Your Name

The scuffling noises woke Tigerclaw up, and he yawned and scooched next to Snaketooth. "What's this? A letter?"

Snaketooth immediately pushed Tigerclaw's face away, afraid that he would drool on the letter. "What's wrong? Why don't you get back to sleep?"

"I'm hungry. I want something to eat," Tigerclaw said as he rubbed his belly.

"Then go boil some water and cook. I want oatmeal, by the way."

"Okay," Tigerclaw replied and then remembered something. "You haven't answered my question."

"It's my identity card and an offer notice," Snaketooth said impatiently.

"Oh?" Tigerclaw's eyes brightened and leaned in again. He threw one arm round Snaketooth's neck and shook him excitedly. "You finally got your ID card! Haha... This is worth celebrating! We need to have something better than oatmeal. Let's go to the market and buy some dried fish and mushrooms."

"I'm still trying to save money."

"I can lend you some," Tigerclaw said unconcernedly. "You've been waiting for your ID card for so long. How could we just let this moment pass without a nice meal for celebration? Did you forget what you said the day I got my ID card?"

Snaketooth knew he couldn't reject Tigerclaw kind intentions.

Tigerclaw was a tall and sturdy man. He worked hard and was often much more efficient than other workers, especially when he had enough food. His foreman was aware of this and started to value him more and later even chose him to be the model worker of the third construction team. He earned a higher wage and also

got a bonus, so he actually had enough money to pay for the down payment of a house.

Any migrants would get their ID cards if they gained permanent abode. The day Tigerclaw got the key to his new house and his ID card, Snaketooth egged him on holding a feast for celebration and even moved his belongings into the new cement house.

"Okay, okay. I got it." Snaketooth said helplessly. "Let's go later."

"Well, that's settled then!" Tigerclaw was satisfied and returned to his bedside and rummaged for something to wear for shopping. "By the way, what's in that notification?"

"It's an offer from the railway construction team." Snaketooth drew a deep breath and said, "It won't be soon before I go to work in the Barbarian Land outside Graycastle's borders."

"What?" Tigerclaw hands stopped abruptly. "When did you apply for that? Why didn't you tell me?"

"What if you insist on going with me? This house will then be left unattended."

"I wouldn't go with you. No... I mean, why would I go to such a dangerous place?" Tigerclaw's voice raised. "You know what happened recently. There are demons outside the city!"

The demons' recent attack on the city wall had stirred up major unrest amongst the citizens. At first, the alarm went off again and again, then, there were weird monsters dropping into the city, and then the ceremony held at that night was just mind-boggling to everyone.

King Roland announced publically that they were the enemies humanity will have to face sooner or later. He also stressed that the so-called Barbarian Land was not deserted at the beginning but instead a place that was once had a nicer name: "Fertile Plains." That was where humans used to live. It was not until demonic beasts and demons started to harass them did people began to

retreat to where the Four Kingdoms are now.

Some of the people who fled from the Fertile Plains established the church. They lied about the enemies, describing them as being omnipotent, and falsely accused the witches of being related to the demons, out of fear for their magic powers. But the victory Neverwinter had achieved this time proved that even though the demons were cunning and frightening, they were not invincible.

To expand the territory and protect Neverwinter from the enemies' attack, the King decided to march on the Barbarian Land as soon as possible to reclaim the land that had once belonged to humans! The King's declaration during the celebration inspired countless cheers, and as the First Army served meat porridge and roasts to the audiences, the atmosphere at the square reached its peak.

In the next five days, you could hear people discussing about the demons everywhere you went. Snaketooth's colleagues in the construction team were no different. They were the most interested in the topics like "demon and demonic beast, which one is stronger?" "Should Neverwinter expand to the northwest?". Meanwhile, the City Hall issued a series of recruitment announcements, one of which was the job of building the railway in the Misty Forest.

Snaketooth barely cared about the answers to these questions, yet he felt what His Majesty had said somehow enlightened his mind. Suddenly his mind became clear. He had never thought about where he had come from and where he would go. Now he finally understood that all of them had migrated from the "Barbarian Land." The world was much larger than the Four Kingdoms, and its boundaries stretched far beyond the Fertile Plains, which by itself was several times larger than Graycastle.

Also, he was tempted by the good pay.

Tigerclaw turned around and grabbed Snaketooth by his arm,

and said, "You were always the insightful one, so I think you should understand this clearer than me. The demons are not as easy to deal with as everyone thinks they are. How could the demons drive humanity to the brink of extinction if they were weak? His Majesty said there used to be hundreds of city and millions of people living on the Fertile Plains."

"Of course I know that. That's why I have made up my mind." Snaketooth remained unmoved. "The pay is 35 silver royals per month, and they will even pay me the first six months' salary before I start work. Furthermore, I'll be eligible to buy a suite of two rooms. Chances like these are hard to come by."

"A suite of two rooms..." Tigerclaw twisted his mouth. "You are really obsessed with that aren't you."

"Of course." Snaketooth made a fist. "It's got a hot water supply system, and the kitchen and bathroom are separated. That's what a house should be like."

Although he did not get paid as much as Tigerclaw, he had saved up about one gold royal by now. Ever since he had seen their foreman's home, he had decided to buy a suite of two rooms of his own in the residential area in the inner city. But because down payment would cost him three gold royals, which was much higher than normal houses, he hadn't been able to do so.

Most importantly, although Snaketooth did not tell others, two bedrooms would be more comfortable for the both of them, unlike the single room where they had to share a small bed.

Seeing that Tigerclaw was still trying to discourage him from taking on the job, Snaketooth shook his head to stop him and said, "I know this is a little risky, but when we were Rats, we took risks almost every day. The only difference was that most of the risks we took at that time ended up being in vain, while now we could at least ensure that our effort will pay off. You all think I have a quick wit, but that's scarcely useful in Neverwinter. If we wanted to have

a safe and settled life, why did we move to a foreign city to begin with?"

"You know that I can never win an argument with you." Tigerclaw raised his hands in surrender. "I have no objection as long as you have thought things through."

"Don't worry. I'm not so reckless as to care only about profit." Snaketooth said as he spread his palm. "The First Army will be responsible for the security, and it's said that some witches will set out with the construction team. Even if we were to run into demons, they wouldn't make us fight the enemies with our poles and shovels. Relatively, it's a safe job."

"I hope that's true," Tigerclaw muttered. "I'm going wash up. My stomach is growling. Now that you got a job with a better pay, I will make the most out of this meal."

Snaketooth rolled his eyes at that.

As Tigerclaw was washing, Snaketooth unfolded the third piece of paper and he was a little shocked by the content.

It was a transfer contract.

In short, it said that no matter what happened, the City Hall would not go back on anyone's salaries and rewards. The workers could choose any person to whom he or she would sign over their property in case of major accidents. That person would receive the notification from the City Hall as soon as the transfer contract is valid.

Snaketooth closed his eyes, some figures flashing through his mind: Joe, Sunflower, Tigerclaw... At last, the frame froze at a skinny, fair-skinned girl.

Snaketooth picked up the charcoal and wrote the name carefully in the blank space provided in the contract.

"Paper."

Chapter 932: Someone Impossible to Meet

Horford Quinn stood in front of the french window with a filled wine glass in hand and stared at the city covered by the night sky.

This was the center of the Kingdom of Dawn, also known as "the city that never sleeps." The lights started from the Rising Sun Avenue and extended to both sides like a lush tree of light. At the top of the tree was the most famous market of the kingdom, where countless rare products were sold. For the merchants, the night was when their day started.

To maintain the glittering glory of the city, the daily consumption of candles, firewood, and kerosene in the king's city was astonishing. The fish fat from the eastern harbor and the wood from the northern hills were continuously imported into the city ship after ship. This industry alone could feed nearly 10,000 people and more than 100 merchants.

And this was only a small part of the commercial trade of this city.

Normally, Horford's greatest pleasure was to enjoy the glow of the night city. Under the joint governance of John Moore's royalties and the three families, the city changed from a wasteland into today's famous bustling place. This was also due to the continual efforts of their ancestors.

But today, he felt tired seeing all of this.

The night scene of the City of Glow looked the same as before. It remained captivating and touching. Yet just outside the range of its glow, was a dark undercurrent could no longer be ignored.

Even while faced with such a brightly lit domain, he still felt a great deal of anxiety

Maybe he was getting old... Horford sipped his wine, but the bitterness in his mouth overpowered the wine's sweetness.

"Father." The study door was pushed open, and a young man came in. "Baron Alfonse from Northwind City would like to meet you."

"No," replied Horford, without turning his head. "Just say that I'm sick."

"But..." He hesitated for a moment, then waved his hand at the old butler.

The old butler immediately nodded, then turned and walked out of the study.

Seeing that only two of them were left in the room, Hawn started to voice out his worries. "Father, this is the 12th noble that you have rejected. Even I know that there's a problem in the palace. These foreign nobles' intention for entering the city was very obvious. If you refuse to see them, I'm afraid they will mistakenly think that..."

"Mistakenly think what?"

"Mistakenly think that..." He bit his lip and said, "That you're still on the side of His Majesty Appen Moya."

"Hawn..." Earl Quinn turned around and frowned at the heir to the Quinn family. "Do you think it's a mistake that the three families are on the side of the King of Dawn?"

"But now His Majesty no longer needs us," said Hawn, as he mustered up his courage. "Since our army suffered a huge loss in Hermes, he no longer asks for your consultation! You're the Prime Minister, and you can't even enter the Royal Palace. And now even the patrol team has been replaced by mercenaries. Just look at the kind of people who are summoned into the palace these days. There are only clowns, dancers, and geishas!"

The earl did not answer but just stared silently at his glass of wine.

Hawn was only eighteen years old, but even he could see what

the arrival of the nobility from all over the country to the king's city meant. The other local nobles must have also already sensed the changes in the castle. In fact, when he learned of the defeat of their supposedly unstoppable army, he had already expected that this day would come—more than 10,000 troops and most of the lords of the towns were involved in trying to get a piece of fortune from the husk of the once mighty church. However, not only did they not earn any benefits, many of the troops even lost their lives.

It would have been fine if that was the only consequence, but the King of Dawn had come back alive with his knightage in shambles. The news of Appen's shameful return had spread like wildfire as it fulfilled two conditions at the same time—the need for someone to be held accountable for this failed mission; and the fact that the power Appen held was no longer enough to dispel the greed of the other nobles.

These nobles that sneaked quietly into the city at night gave out a clear signal. They undoubtedly wanted to see the reactions of the three big families before deciding whether to support or unite—but no one would ever agree to uphold the status quo.

Horford could guess the thoughts of these people even with his eyes closed. Since there was such a huge loss of resources in Hermes, they would obviously try to find ways to make up for that loss.

"Father," Hawn spoke hurriedly as he saw that his father was silent. "Things are not like they were ten years ago, and Appen Moya is no longer His Majesty Moya. Look at the house of Luoxi! Otto Luoxi is still locked in the palace cell! You're the Prime Minister of the Imperial Palace, and you're held in high esteem by the people. If you make a stand and get the support of the two other big families, I'm sure the nobles will be happy to follow your lead!"

"Make a stand?" Earl Quinn's eyes narrowed and his voice portrayed a hint of danger.

"Uh..." Hawn stammered, and he lowered his head in panic. He replied in defense of himself. "You don't have to stand on the side of His Majesty Appen, right? Otherwise, why would you claim to be sick, and refuse to receive anyone? If it were the old king, you would have personally persuaded those nobles to consider the stability of the kingdom first."

Horford sighed and realized that his son was still too young. "And if you're right, do you think that Appen Moya wouldn't have seen that coming?"

"What?" Hawn was stunned for a second.

"I bet there are eyes watching us just outside of our mansion. They're spying on who I've met and where I've gone recently, and I'm Appen is kept well informed of this." The earl returned to his desk and sat down. "Imagine what would've happened to me had I just went ahead and met those nobles. Don't forget that even if he lost his entire knightage, the control over the kingdom still wouldn't be that much weakened. From the day Appen ascended the throne, he had already begun to change the guards and the castle guards to his people! Rebel right under his very nose? Do you think that those noble lords will come to rescue me when he puts the noose around my neck?" He slammed the table. "And now do you understand why the Luoxi family and the Tokat family hadn't come to find me, but only the foreign nobles?"

Horn gasped, "Then why don't you go back to the domain first? At least your knights and mercenaries are there, together with the recruited serfs, so even if he wants to plan anything against you..."

The Earl shook his head and said, "The Quinn family has already settled down here for far too long. Our connections, distant relatives, productions, power... Even if I could slip out of the city alone, I wouldn't be able to bring everything out. Our people will suffer greatly at the hand of the King if they so much as make any suspicious moves, so I can't make such a rash move. In fact, my stay in the City of Glow is a guarantee in and of itself. Feigning

illness was already the most that I could show. Other than that, there really isn't much that I can do."

Being closely tied to the workings of the king's city used to be a source of pride for their family, yet it has now become the Quinns' fatal weakness. This was certainly a kind of irony.

"Really... but I don't think so." Just then, a strange voice came from outside.

Horford's face changed drastically, as the speaker was obviously not a servant or guard of the household as intruding upon them like that was a serious offense. How did this person get through the guards? Why didn't anyone respond when the person spoke?

"Who's that?" Horn was equally shocked. He turned around in panic and looked for a weapon, but could only get his hands on a candlestick.

"It's me." The door opened, and a blonde-haired girl appeared before Horford Quinn. The strange girl for some reason looked familiar to him. "Do you remember me? My lord."

Chapter 933: The King's Orders

Earl Quinn froze, and he did not even realize that he had dropped the wine glass he had been holding.

The moment he saw her, he couldn't help but think of the name of two people—One of the two had stayed by him for more than half of his life, but because she had lost someone she loved, she fell into a depression that eventually led to the end of her life. The other person was the loved that was lost, and she was also someone he was supposed never to meet again. Nearly ten years had passed, and even though she was now much taller and more beautiful, Earl Quinn could still recognize her. But the two had such a striking resemblance that he almost blurted out the wrong name.

"Father, do you know her?" Hawn's words made him regain his senses.

Horford stood up slowly and asked calmly, "Are you... Andrea?"

"What? Are you saying that she's... the one, the one that had passed away..." Horn stared back and forth between them as he in muttered disbelief.

"Master, it really is Miss Andrea!" The old housekeeper was more excited than anyone else in the room. "I can't be mistaken. She has inherited all the characteristics of Madame!"

"It seems like you remember me," said Andrea, in an expressionless manner, "in that case, our negotiation will be much easier."

Horford could not help but feel rattled in his heart. The fact that his daughter had awakened as a witch was a secret hidden from everyone. Even Andrea's mother, his wife Fenancy, had no idea about this. When Andrea's maid had informed him about the incident, he instantly chose to drown the maid by pushing her into the river and had his men cover it up as a fake accident.

Although he knew that doing so might make his daughter hate him forever, at least this way she would remember who her father was. But upon meeting again, the decision he made all those years ago had turned into a sharp thorn in his heart.

This stabbing sensation became even more apparent, as he started to question whether he made the right choice back then.

But the earl knew that there were more pressing matters now—why Andrea would appear in the City of Glow and whether her identity was true or false. Moreover, he couldn't figure out what she meant by "I don't think so." These questions were more important than pursuing past mistakes.

He suppressed all the doubts and thoughts in his heart and waved at Horn. "You can go out first."

"Father!" Hawn responded worryingly.

"Just do as I said!" Horford replied firmly.

Seeing that he could not change his father's mind, Hawn left the room reluctantly.

"Don't alarm the others," the earl said to the steward, "and at the same time close the courtyard door and put out the lights in the hall. If someone in the government asks, just say that I'm drafting some documents and that no one should be allowed to disturb me. Do you understand?"

"I will do that right away! But..." The butler touched his head and said, "What about those friends that Miss Andrea brought?"

"Friends?" He glanced over at Andrea, suspiciously. "Take them to the ballroom and take care of them properly."

"Yes, Master!"

As the door shut with a squeak, the study suddenly plunged into silence. The pair stared at each other for a long time, until the earl could not resist anymore and broke the silence first. "Although you

and my daughter are a bit alike, I can't confirm so rashly that you're Andrea. After all, she was only 16 when she left, and now ten years have passed..." He paused and said, "Do you have other ways to prove your identity?"

In truth, he had already believed that this was his daughter, so the question was just to confirm that—even the best kind of face-morphing abilities could not change one's soul. From her every move, the earl could see the shadow of the Flower of Glow.

Instead of answering, Andrea opened her hands, and a bow of magic power appeared in her palm. The glittering, longbow converged and diminished little by little, evolving into a distinctive appearance—that was a gift that he had made for his daughter's birthday, a long time ago.

At this point, Horford no longer had any doubt. This bow and arrow for beginners had long been destroyed together with the carriage, and even now he could not accurately describe its appearance.

Andrea, who was especially interested in shooting at an early age, clearly still remembered this gift.

"It's you..." said the count with a long sigh. "Why did you come back? I gave you away in the first place so that you could continue to live safely."

"Was that the only reason?" Andrea retrieved the longbow and said, "Or were you afraid that outsiders would find out that the Prime Minister had a daughter that had fallen under the temptation of the demon? I didn't think I was being protected. It felt more like abandonment. There was no safe place for a witch like me. If it weren't for my luck that I got to meet a group of people who had the same fate as me, I would have died ages ago in who knows where."

He opened his mouth but could not refute her argument because that was indeed one of his concerns back then. Once people found

out that Andrea was a witch, the whole family would be in danger—not everyone would be comfortable with sending their family to the church or the other nobles. Rather than let the entire Quinn family face this difficult choice, it would be better for him to make that decision alone.

"But those were all in the past, and I'm not here to dig up old wounds." Andrea said positively, "You must be curious as to how I could enter the earl's residence so easily, even though the guards wouldn't easily believe my rhetoric. And when I saw the butler, I deliberately waited for a while outside the door. Is the one who called you father the heir to the family? When did I have such a brother?"

"He came from a branch... Your mother died a year after you left, and the Quinn family needed a successor," Horford whispered.

If that incident did not happen 10 years ago, this position would have belonged to the eldest daughter.

After hearing this news, Andrea was stunned at first; then her eyes started to turn dim. After a moment's silence, she spoke, "In any case, the family leader of the Quinn can't be changed at the moment, and His Majesty would like you to go one step further and not back down now. In the current situation, other than Earl Quinn of the three big families, he won't recognize any other agent."

"What does that mean?" Horford was a bit confused about the meaning of her words, "The Majesty you referred to is—"

"Who else but the king of Graycastle, His Majesty Roland Wimbledon. I've come here this time under his orders." Andrea took a deep breath and spelled out her next words one by one. "My lord, how do you feel about being the new King of Dawn?"

Chapter 934: Rise of The Glowing City

"What are you... saying?" Even Earl Quinn, who had been through countless storms in his life, was left completely dumbfounded by Andrea's sentence.

But what he was surprised of was not her mention of a "new King of Dawn," but that she was under orders of His Majesty Roland Wimbledon. These words carried a whole different meaning when said by different people.

Hawn had essentially suggested the same thing earlier, but the earl knew very well that the Quinn family alone had no way to rid Dawn of its current royalty. What Hawn meant by taking a stand was just an unrealistic fantasy.

However, now that the one speaking had the support of the King of Graycastle, those words carried more power.

"Just as you have thought." Probably due to the news of her mother's death, Andrea's tone was no longer as sharp. "His Majesty Roland doesn't want to have Appen Moya stay on the throne but nor does he wish for a destabilized kingdom. It's, therefore, necessary to support a new king with the backing of the populace to successfully control the situation as soon as possible.

After confirming that he didn't mishear her first sentence, the earl muttered, "But why me?"

"His Majesty doesn't have many people that he can trust in the Kingdom of Dawn, so he chose me at first. But I refused."

Just because of this?

Because the daughter refused, so the throne was thrown to her father. This kind of behavior was like that of a child's... But strangely, Horford did not think that this was a joke.

Although Appen had completely banned people from talking about the defeat at Hermes, it was impossible to block the flow of

all the information related to the battle because too many nobles had been involved with it. Horford knew very well that the enemy he encountered was not the church; it was Graycastle that took over the holy city. The 10,000-strong army was defeated in an instant, and many of those who had survived could not even describe what happened during the battle. They only saw flames continually falling from the heavens amidst the chaos. The thunder-like flashes of fire smashed into their ranks, reducing both common serfs and armored knights into piles of ashes.

If the news was anywhere near accurate, this meant that Graycastle's power had far exceeded the expectations of the nobles. With such great discrepancy in military might, it would not be unreasonable for Graycastle to appoint new kings for neighboring countries anyhow they liked.

The only question left was why the King did not come himself.

"If the nobles in the Kingdom of Dawn were willing to group their forces under a single banner and start a rebellion together, the Earl would have definitely chosen this option." Andrea seemed to have anticipated that he would try to raise this question. "Simply said, right now, His Majesty Roland has more important enemies to deal with, so he does not have the time nor resources to try to integrate the Kingdom of Dawn into Graycastle in the next three or four years. After all, even though destroying the current ruling royalty was simple, restabilizing the country afterward would be a lengthy process."

"More important... enemies?"

"Yes, the demons." Andrea said slowly, "Otto Passi should have already mentioned that all the church's actions were due to the news of the Battle of Doomsday. That was just a small part of the mystery. The name of this war was called The Battle for Divine will and has lasted for nearly a thousand years."

After listening to his daughter's story, Earl Horford felt the cold

sweat run down his back.

The Four Kingdoms, including the Kingdom of Dawn, was merely a corner of a continent? As of now, humanity had already suffered defeat in two consecutive wars and was unable to stop the advance of the demons, and a third defeat would lead to the extinction of humankind. Under such dire circumstances, Roland Wimbledon still dared to bear this heavy burden and go to battle with a mighty enemy to gain Divine Will.

How much will and courage would a man need to do this?

Just thinking about it was already enough to cause the Earl to forget to breathe for a couple of seconds.

"Why?" said the earl hurriedly. "How would this benefit him? Does he not fear the consequences of failing?"

"I don't know..." Andrea sighed and said, "This has been mentioned by Her Highness Tilly previously, but her speculation was even more puzzling."

"What did she say?"

"She said that he's not doing it for humanity, but for himself..." She hesitated and said, "It was as if he was looking for a new challenge, and we just happened to be the beneficiaries in this situation."

The earl did not answer, because he did not know what to say. He had seen many different nobles, but none of them was anything like Roland Wimbledon. Eventually, he put this question aside and returned to the main topic. "What does he require of me? To fight for him?"

"No," Andrea shook her head. "Your only job would be to maintain the stability of the Kingdom of Dawn, and provide resources when needed. This includes manpower, raw ore and other kinds of resources. As for the specific amounts and types, His Majesty will later send someone to discuss with you in detail."

Horford was relieved to hear that there was a price to pay for Graycastle's support. If Roland wanted to support the Quinn family without asking for anything in return, he would certainly be suspicious of any conspiracies behind it. Of course, even if there was a conspiracy, with the current situation in Dawn, he could only bite the bullet and agree.

Feigning illness was only a delaying tactic to reach a balance between Appen and the other nobles. If those nobles turned out to be capable of overthrowing the Moya family, Quinn's family would undoubtedly be excluded from the ruling circle of the king's city due to them just remaining a spectator. That would actually have been the ideal result. If anyone wanted to overthrow the three big families, it would not be at all difficult to spread rumors about them still owning allegiances to the royal family.

This was a rare opportunity.

Not to mention the involvement of Andrea.

She might hate me, but she would never cause her family any harm.

As soon as he thought of this, Earl Horford immediately made a decision.

"Please inform His Majesty Wimbledon, that I'm willing to serve the King of Graycastle." He spoke in a serious manner. Although he was speaking to his daughter, she was now the king's messenger; hence the earl gave a slight bow according to the rules of the nobles. "When would he like to take action? It would take at least two to three months to prepare for Graycastle's troops to infiltrate the city."

Even if Appen took away his power to run the patrol team, Horford was still confident about letting dozens or so Graycastle men into the city. After all, as the prime minister who had served two different kings, he still had a certain degree of influence within the city. The earl believed that those foreign nobles who

wanted to persuade him over to their side also realized this point.

According to the strength that Graycastle had demonstrated in the previous battle they fought with Dawn's troops, dozens of the Graycastle soldiers should be more than enough to take control of the city gate.

However, Andrea's following words went far beyond his expectations.

"Now that you've promised to our request, we will act immediately," she said lightly. "His Majesty Roland had emphasized that he did not want a political assassination, but rather a complete defeat of Appen Moya in front of the public. Not only does everyone need to witness the end of the Moya family, the greedy nobles who had selfish intentions would also have to be convinced that any resistance is futile."

"What?" He did not believe what he had heard. "But how?"

"Do you know how I got here?" Andrea laid out her hands and said, "I came in from the main entrance. Those guards did try to stop me, but they couldn't do it."

Horford immediately realized that the friends she brought were the key. Barging into the earl's residence at the king's city was not an impossible feat, as this was not his home territory. But to do so without raising any alarms was quite astounding. This meant that the guards were most likely subdued within an instant.

There is no doubt that this was not Andrea's doing, as each of those guards was armed with a God's Stone of Retaliation.

"Wait till you meet them. All of your doubts would naturally vanish by then." She continued and said, "So what the Quinn family needs to do right now is to cause a scene—the louder the noise, the better it is. Everyone in the Glowing City should have their attention on this so that Appen Moya will have no choice but to come out and face you in public."

Chapter 935: A Glimpse of Hope in the Dark

Otto Passi was woken up by loud noises.

He struggled to lift his heavy eyelids and looked around. The candles on the candlestick had already burnt to the bottom, and the remaining flickers of flame weren't enough to light up the dark room.

He could not tell day from night in this underground cell, and the candle became his only measure of time. The guards would replace the candles every six hours when they come to bring him food.

But that was only in the beginning.

Now they seldom came, be it with candle or food. Sometimes, he would wake up from hunger and find that the cell was still completely dark.

How long had he been locked here? Otto pressed and shook his forehead, trying to squeeze out any last bit of remaining energy. The prolonged lack of sunlight had made him haggard, and constantly waking up in an isolated and pitch-black environment made him feel helpless and abandoned. As if he forgotten by the world.

But he must live on.

Because both his father's entire Luoxi family's fates are in Appen's hands.

Otto propped up his frail body, rolled out of bed and limped slowly to the railings. Other than replenishing the plates and jugs, he also hoped that the caretaker could give him a razor blade. His long unshaven beard had long since covered his cheeks, and bits and pieces of leftover food and grease could be found stuck there. Over time, his face smelled like rotten orange peels. If his caretaker were worried about the blade being a potential weapon, Otto wouldn't even mind letting the caretaker shave him instead.

Afterall, he was still a noble, and the request for grooming shouldn't be something unreasonable.

Otto then heard the sounds of a conversation outside the iron gate.

"What were those people thinking? The person imprisoned here is the eldest son of the Passi family!"

The ones who were speaking did not try to cover up their voices so it seemed that they did not mind their conversation being heard by Otto.

"Jokes and ridicule... Isn't that what clowns do?"

"Are they crazy? Normally, if these acrobats dared to offend the earl's son, I'm afraid that they would be fed to the fishes next day. They're nothing more than a group of homeless wanderers!"

"Well that was when times were normal. Back then, would the eldest son be kept in the dungeon? Now His Majesty likes to see these guys perform. Without the approval of the King of Dawn, I don't think they would dare to do such a thing."

"Pui, you're just speaking nonsense."

"I'm just saying. You don't have to believe me, and even if you don't, what can you do? Are you going to trade dinner with that lord in the cell?"

"Sigh, forget it. It's just a few mouthfuls of saliva. He won't die from eating it." Then the sound of a bunch of keys jingling around could be heard.

"That's right, and if this is what His Majesty wants to see, they aren't you just asking for trouble? Go ahead. I still have to retrieve the food tray."

The iron gate made a screeching sound, and the warden walked in while holding a tray of food.

"Oh, Milord, you're already awake?" He was a little surprised to

see Otto already leaning against the railings, but he quickly hid his awkward expression. "Well then, you might as well finish up today's dinner now. I'll change the candles tomorrow. The chief steward forgot to send new ones over."

Otto did not answer. He suddenly felt his heart fill with sorrow and he even forgot to request for a razor blade. Although the exchange between the two people was short, he was still able to figure out the gist of the conversation. The clown of the circus troupe happened to bump into the man who was responsible for delivering his food, and he spat a few mouthfuls of saliva into his food in an attempt to amuse Appen Moya.

The shame made his cheeks burn as if they were being baked in an oven.

The warden did not care about Otto's reply and quickly changed the dinner tray before leaving soon after. Although the room was decorated like the room from a duke's mansion, the sense of repression that could be felt inside was unbearable, and no one would want to spend more time in there than they needed to.

As the footsteps went away, the silence once again washed over Otto.

In that very moment, he wanted to scream out loud, curse the warden for his negligence in duty, and reproach Appen for his ignorance... yet he did not do so.

Because that would be meaningless—the former would only delay the next replacement time of the food and candles, while the latter would just gladly let him fall into the trap of his "old friend."

As for the dinner that was used to humiliate him, he had no intention to touch it.

Otto could not help but wonder if he had been doing the right thing.

Just as he was ready to go back to bed, his whole body suddenly

started trembling. In the corner of his eye, the oatmeal started to turn into a bowl of black water!

Passi's eldest son rubbed his eyes, slowly moved closer to the plate, and carefully lifted the bowl of oatmeal.

That was not an illusion, nor was it the shadow of the weak flame. The oatmeal had turned black, like some thick ink.

Suddenly, an idea flashed through his mind.

Acrobatics troupe, clowns, tricks... was all this arranged by that person?

"Yorko said you were an ordinary acrobat. Is that true? How did you come to know His Majesty, Roland?"

"It was a coincidence. As to why His Majesty would choose me was probably because my acrobatic performance wasn't bad."

"Oh, can you demonstrate it?"

"Ok, I'll perform the simplest trick of the thief who spits ink."

Otto stared blankly at the oatmeal for a moment, and suddenly inserted his finger into the bowl! After groping around for a little while, at the tip of his finger, he could feel a rough touch.

"How... how did this happen? Why did the water suddenly change color?"

"It's not done yet. Look at this chiffon. Can you see there's nothing on it? Now I'm going to put it in the water to make it wet and then use the fire to dry it. Guess what will happen next?"

"There's nothing, right... uh, wait, that's... a word?"

"Can you see what's written?"

"Let me see, is this... your name?"

"You're right, Hill Fawkes is my name."

Otto gently pinched that rough item, and slowly pulled it out of the oatmeal—it looked almost transparent, and he couldn't tell if it

was immersed in the oatmeal. The chiffon could only be felt with his fingers.

He held his breath, walked quickly to the candlestick, and spread it out a little.

The faint black water marks began to fade, while the candlelight started to waver.

"Hurry... hurry... hurry... hurry up." His heart was shouting anxiously. The swaying shadow seemed to come from all directions, and it was as if the black chiffon he held in his hands was the only light in the whole world.

At the moment the letter marks appeared, the candle went out.

Darkness then engulfed the entire dungeon.

Otto could not help but laugh heartily.

He pressed down on his trembling shoulders and stuffed the chiffon into his mouth. Then he crawled back to the railing and swallowed it with the oatmeal.

The warmth spread through his throat and stomach and filled his whole body with strength. However, compared to the oatmeal, it was his heart that felt warmest.

As he drank the oatmeal silently, a tear rolled down from the corner of his eye.

His determination was finally worth it.

There were only a few words on the chiffon. They were written with beautiful handwriting and gave him a nostalgic feeling for his childhood.

"Don't be afraid. I'm coming."

Chapter 936: Close Combat

"What did you say?" The King of Dawn pushed away the dancer in his arms as he suddenly stood up.

The dancer, a beautiful woman with nothing more than a pink silk scarf wrapped around her half-covered body, fell to the ground. Though she was hurt badly, she did not dare to voice out her pain.

The rest of the servants, performers, and jugglers also lowered their heads in panic. The entire palace abruptly became silent.

"Your Majesty..." The Secretary of State gulped and said, "Your Prime Minister has rebelled."

"Are you sure he has truly rebelled and isn't just supporting those idiots on the outside?" Appen didn't know whether it was him who had misheard his minister or it was the fault of his staff blowing the news out of proportion.

Of course, he knew about the plans of those traitorous nobles—everyone who had returned alive from Hermes had witnessed the destruction of the king's personal knightage as well as his miserable escape. It would have been naive of him to expect them to remain loyal to the royal family.

Some amount of rebellion was only to be expected. Gathering support and forming alliances with the three major families in the royal capital would clearly be their first choice. Appen had long been wary about this, but he believed that, going by the characters of the three old veterans, they would most likely play by the rules and lie low behind closed doors. After all, the king's city was still in his hands, and any act of defiance was tantamount to suicide.

He did not expect that the first to cause a problem would be the Quinn family.

The collision with the smaller lords had already violated Appen's

bottom line. Perhaps the old earl just wanted to leave a way out for himself or make a stand... But no matter what the reason was, punishment was absolutely inevitable for such an impertinent act. For example Otto Luoxi—Appen had already shown mercy by not killing his childhood friend on the spot.

But... what does 'rebellious' mean?

Earl Quinn is still in the City of Glow, and he has neither subjects nor soldiers here. Does he want to rebel with just his dozen or so guards alone? That would be ridiculous. How would he be able to rebel?

"The earl did contact the other nobles, but not in secret. He issued an invitation!" The minister wiped the sweat from his forehead and said, "And he publicly invited all the nobles to his mansion to persuade them to support the Quinn family!"

Appen was stunned and almost unable to understand the news he had heard.

This move could indeed be perceived as a rebellion, but the way he did it was incredible!

Instead of asking for help from the nobles, he's asking them to support the Quinn family—does Horford really know what he's doing?

He had already become a dangerous vessel that could sink any time. How could he still think about getting the support of the nobility? This act was undoubtedly going to turn both sides into bitter enemies, and there was no way Moya could ever tolerate such a grave act of provocation. The sheer stupidity of the situation would only make those nobles look down on him.

But still, was the Prime Minister such an arrogant person in the past?

Appen brooded silently for a long time before finally saying, "Pass my orders down. Commander Duke Bachov is to lead the patrol

team to the earl's residence, arrest Horford Quinn, and bring him in front of me." "Everyone else in his residence is to be temporarily locked up in custody. If anyone opposes him, he may kill them on the spot! I would like to see how the earl is going to explain this."

"Yes, Your Majesty!"

After this news, he was no longer in the mood for seeking pleasure. He dismissed everyone in the hall and sat paralyzed on the throne.

He didn't really want to drown himself in pleasure, but once the surroundings became quiet his ears would echo once again with the roar of the sky thunder.

The war that ended more than a month ago had left a deep impression on him that he could never forget.

No... it was not a war, but a one-sided massacre.

His troops had no strength to fight back.

Whether it was the knights or the serfs, it made no difference when they were faced with the attack from Graycastle.

After he got back to the king's city, Appen found that he no longer had the courage to confront Roland—the failure on the battlefield caused him even more heartache than the death of his father.

What made things even worse was the fact he knew that the Moya family had effectively lost the entire Kingdom of Dawn. What was the fate of offending a powerful neighbor? There was no doubt that, sooner or later, the other party would annex the country that he inherited from his father, and there was nothing he could do about it!

When he ascended the throne, he was full of ambition and was bent on governing this kingdom well. He wanted the citizens to live a stable life, and no longer have to worry about witches, demonic beasts, or other foreign threats. But just a year after he

took over, and he was already completely disillusioned and had lost interest in political affairs and commerce. He was just waiting for the enemy's army to attack and leave him hanging on the city wall.

As he thought about this point, Appen's hatred toward the king of Graycastle kept growing immensely, and he wanted to eat him alive!

If not for Roland Wimbledon, he would have left a mark in the pages of history as a famous leader of his generation!

All this was the latter's fault—Graycastle's new king had been bewitched by witches!

He slammed his palm on the armrest, and the burning fire in his heart had nowhere to be vented.

When Earl Quinn has been captured, I will make him have a taste of a king's anger!

However, in the afternoon, his newly appointed minister ran into the palace in a panic.

"Your Majesty, Sir Bachov is dead! The patrol... The whole army is gone!"

"What...!?" The King of Dawn grabbed his collar in shock. "Did they have traps set up in the mansion? Or did they hide in ambush?"

"Yes, they had hidden bodyguards," the minister quickly replied, "I saw it with my own eyes. At first, Bachov asked the earl to come out and barged directly into the house after being denied. But he was immediately killed by the earl's guards. Not only that, these guards also rushed out of the courtyard and ambushed the patrol team that was outside the mansion—they were like madmen. They had all kinds of weapons in their hands, including boning knives, wooden sticks, and even stone bricks... in less than half a minute, the platoon collapsed!"

"How many people did they have?"

"Probably... seven or eight."

"Bastard!" Appen struck the minister to the ground. "You call seven or eight people an ambush? In the City of Glow, even a businessman has a dozen guards. Have you been scared out of your wits!? The patrol team has about one or two hundred people. How can they be defeated by seven or eight guards? Even two hundred wild boars wouldn't fall so fast—don't tell me they can't even compare to pigs in the hunting grounds?"

"Your Majesty, those people... aren't human beings. They're monsters," the Minister cried out his grievances. "Most of the patrol team couldn't even block a single one of their blows. That wasn't the strength and speed of a man!"

Appen suddenly jerked up his head.

He seemed to have seen this type of scenario before.

That's right. He remembered now that his father's killers, the two Pure Witches from the church, had shown him the terrifying prowess of the God's Punishment Army.

Could... Earl Quinn be connected with the church?

An uncontrollable anger suddenly rose from his heart!

"Riseth!" Appen yelled.

A knight came in quickly from outside the hall and knelt on one knee. "Your majesty, what may I do for you?"

"Immediately summon all the mercenaries in the City of Glow and bring in the crossbows and rockets. I want you to burn Earl Quinn's residence to the ground!" He yelled, "I want them all to be burnt to ashes regardless of whether they are human beings or monsters!"

"But... that's the Inner City," the knight hesitated and said, "If it causes a big fire, I'm afraid it will be difficult to control it."

"Shut up and do what I say!" Appen growled hysterically, "If you don't burn him, you don't have to come back to see me!"

Even the God's Punishment Army, when faced with an opponent a hundred times their number and armored with crossbows, would not have a chance of victory. If they wanted to collude with the church, they would only be facing death!

...

The next day, the King of Dawn once again received news from the watchdogs that the entire mercenary group that had been prepared the night before had failed to even reach the earl's residence.

While passing through the Rising Sun Avenue, the mercenary team was attacked by an acrobatics troupe.

He had to make sure he hadn't misheard the minister's report.

An acrobatics troupe performing on the street suddenly attacked the mercenaries in the middle of their performance. The mercenaries caught off guard and suffered heavy losses. It seemed those actors fought the same way as Earl Quinn's guards.

But this time, the weapons in their hands were no longer random debris; they were wielding the daggers, iron hammers, and wooden shields that had belonged to the former patrol team

Chapter 937: A Stinger

In the next few days, the situation had changed so rapidly that it was beyond everyone's expectations.

People in the king's city had never thought that they would witness such a scene. The Quinn family, who had served the royal family of Moya for hundreds of years, publicly opposed Appen Moya.

This was not a secret conspiracy, nor a conflict of interest between noble families which civilians simply could not understand. Everything was on the table. The Prime Minister of the City of Glow stood in front of everyone and publicly declared his ideals and purpose, which was overthrowing the rule of the incompetent tyrant, and promising a bright future for the Kingdom of Dawn.

In his speech, the Earl exemplified the signs of the decline of the city and the tyranny of the new king for more than a year, and he used precise evidence to describe the inevitable fall of the Kingdom of Dawn. Since no noble ever told the people the principles and inside information of running the domain and the speaker was the Prime Minister who had served the king for over a decade, his act surprisingly caused a heated discussion. From the auction house of the Chamber of Commerce to the taverns on the Black Street, nearly everyone was talking about it.

"I have heard that hundreds of people starved to death in the slums last year. It turned out to be caused by the reduction of cultivated land in the outer cities."

"In actuality, more people died in the outer cities. There is nothing wrong with His Majesty's decision to occupy the land for the expansion of the palace, but the Earl said that the amount of grain saved is gradually decreasing. What should we do?"

"No wonder the price of food is so much higher recently."

"I heard that the peasants in suburban towns were forced to serve in the army. Now that the army was defeated, few people are able to come back."

"Doesn't that mean that the food prices will be even higher?"

"Oh, I hope we won't starve during the Months of Demons this year."

"Well, do you want to support Earl Quinn? He has promised, if his promises hold, that there will be no need to worry about the food in the City of Glow and everyone will be able to get enough food in the future."

"Hey, I didn't say that!"

The speech of the Prime Minister quickly spread throughout the City of Glow through these discussions.

Quite a large portion of the people were doubtful about the contents of the propaganda and it was the conflict itself that drew their close attention to this issue.

How often could they witness the conflicts between the great nobles and the royal family of Moya?

For the general public, they usually only heard, from the tavern, the exaggerated and modified rumors or boast of the nobles. These days it was simply too exciting for them.

This was not a show of drama, but a real treason!

King Appen did not remain indifferent. He had ordered several groups of men to stop Earl Quinn, all of which ended in failure. Earl Quinn possessed advantages beyond imagination, and an incredibly powerful guard team became his solid shield, which not only defeated the king's team in spite of a numbers disadvantage, and expanded from a dozen to forty or fifty members.

What was more exciting was that the Earl explained his plan directly. He would move the frontier line 200 meters toward the

Castle District every day until the King of Dawn gave up his throne or was forcibly removed off the throne.

In other words, the confrontation would come to an end in five days or so.

...

"Bang!" "Bang!"

Appen threw everything from the desk on to the carpet. The delicate room became a mess, but it could not quench his anger.

"Damn, damn! When did I occupy the farmland outside the city? Isn't it the problem which my father ordered him to investigate? How dare he blame me for the cause of uncivilized suburban villages and towns! It's Roland Wimbledon's fault!" He almost roared, "It was his witches who killed them, not me!"

"Your Majesty, please appease your anger..." The minister and Chief Knight said, "Now the most important thing is to stop the pace of Horford Quinn so you can dispel his arrogance. The nobles in the kingdom are waiting for your move!"

"I should have thrown them all into jail at the very beginning," Appen thought in anger and then asked, "How many people do we have now?"

"There are still 1,500 knights, lifeguards, and mercenaries in the palace. And if we use the maids and servants, then we have an additional 2,000 hands." The Chief Knight replied, "Outside the Castle District, the stone wall can block the enemy. Though it's not as thick as the city walls, they can stand on it and easily kill the enemy even without much training."

Originally, he intended not to show his hand until he dealt with other lords, especially since the palace lifeguards were nearly as strong as the knights and were equipped to teeth. He had begun to cultivate them before his father passed away, but now he had to use them in the defense of the palace.

"Bring the boxes in the vault and tell the servants that they can get a reward of 100 gold royals as long as they kill a monster!" Appen said, gnashing his teeth, "If they can stop the treason, I'll give them titles and domains! Or promote them if they already have!"

"Yes!"

The God's Punishment Warriors of the church were not impervious to blades and spears, which he had confirmed from the Pure Witches. Even though the monsters were powerful, it was impossible for them to remove the entire stone wall by hand!

As for the fact that the monsters were increasing in number, it must be a trick played by Earl Quinn. He must have arranged for them to hide somewhere beforehand, and then disguised themselves as if he had more and more helpers.

No noble would believe that there were so many fierce warriors in the City of Glow and that they did not emerge until now. The stupid civilians might believe it, but their opinions had little effect on the situation.

"Has Horford gotten the support of other nobles yet?" Appen turned to the minister.

The latter immediately became embarrassed and replied, "Uh, well..."

"Speak!"

"It is rumored that 'Black Money' started to come into contact with Earl Quinn, but the specifics of the situation is still not known yet—"

"Those greedy wolves!" Appen clenched his fist and angrily said, "My father treated their underground kennel as part of the market. In my opinion, I should have confiscated their property much earlier!"

However, he also knew that he could do nothing but express his

anger. The organizers of Black Money were all rich businessmen in the City of Glow, and their status was no lower than that of the great nobles. Moreover, a large amount of wealth accumulated by the Moya family came from those people.

"In addition, the Tokat family has openly supported the Quinn family," the minister swallowed and said. "But Your Majesty, please don't be too worried. I heard that the Luoxi family had rejected Horford Quinn's invitation several times. "

"These were the three families which my father was so proud of..." Appen sneered silently and thought, "Now two of them have become traitors, even faster than those minor nobles who are sitting on the fence. And the reason why the last family doesn't act is because Otto Luoxi is still in my hands."

But this might be his weapon.

"Send someone to tell Earl Luoxi that if he wants to prove his innocence, he must immediately bring his knights and squires to support the palace," said Appen coldly. "Otherwise... I will not show any mercy toward the rebellious family."

"It will be done!" The minister quickly replied.

Four hours later, the King of Dawn received a message that Earl Luoxi was willing to comply with his demands, which made his anger somewhat abate a little. He managed to mark a little comeback in the face of bad news.

Appen did not care too much about Luoxi's knights. Most importantly, he knew that the younger generation of the three families was close friends. He wondered whether they would still be line with the family when they knew one of them would die if they opposed to the king.

This was undoubtedly a stinger which they could not remove.

Soon, the deadline announced by Horford Quinn, the Prime Minister, arrived.

Chapter 938: The First Shot

When dawn's light shed over the city walls and into the inner city of the king's city, it showed that everywhere in the city was crowded with curious people.

It had never been so busy and lively in the City of Glow.

This was different from the auction exhibitions which were only available for the rich tradesmen and nobles, this was a "carnival" for all the people in the city. They originally had no connection with the upper class. Even the knights, the lowest level of nobles, were superior in their eyes. However, they now had an opportunity to witness the changing of power at the highest levels. Especially when they followed Earl Quinn's team to move forward, they even had the illusion that they were also making the change.

Now, few people mentioned the word "treason"; instead, it was replaced by "fighting for the throne".

This battle would give a clear answer to who would be the ruler of the Kingdom of Dawn.

"It seems that in everyone's eyes, your reputation is extraordinary," said Hill Fawkes, who was riding a horse side by side with Earl Quinn. "I thought the public opinion won't change until you occupied the Castle District."

"That's probably because I have reorganized the patrol team and dealt with the domestic affairs of the country for half of my life," the old Earl said with a sigh, "Is this also what you gathered when you ran the circus?"

Although Hill Fawkes was just a civilian without any title and the status of an acrobatics troupe performer was even inferior to a freeman, Horford did not dare to despise him. According to what Andrea said, Hill was the real representative of the King of Graycastle, and he had a higher position than Yorko the

Ambassador. After Yorko retreated, Hill did not leave; instead, he began to run several acrobatics troupes. This way, he hid his identity and scattered eyes and ears to every corner of the city. In the face of such a skilled man who was deeply trusted by Roland, he had to show his respect even though he was an Earl.

In addition, he also needed his help at the moment.

"The wishes of the civilians are very important, my lord." Hill nodded. "In the eyes of the great nobles, they may only be humble grains of sand or tax-offering lambs, but sometimes the sand will bury people and lambs can ruin the herdsman. If this occurs in Neverwinter, I think the result probably will be completely different."

"What will happen in your opinion?" Earl Tokat, who was riding on the other side of the Prime Minister, curiously asked.

"As long as there is such a sign, the people will already report the revolt to the City Hall before His Majesty does anything," Hill replied with a smile.

"Hill... Sir," Oro Tokat, Otto Luoxi's good friend, coughed and pointed to the team following them, "Did you summon the Rats following behind us?"

"I happen to have some connection with their chief," Hill frankly said, "so what do you think of it? This gathers much more momentum for us."

"That's right, " the old Earl thought, "After wearing the leather armors offered by Black Money, the team of over a thousand Rats looks quite plausible." Otherwise, his team would not be such a deterrence since there are only about 40 Extraordinary warriors, as well as the guards of Earl Tokat and his own. However, Rats were useless in other aspects. Moreover, as a great noble, he felt quite uncomfortable to march together with the Rats on Black Street.

In addition, the Rats were infamous for being double-crossers

and asking for more than they should. Earl Quinn wondered what kind of deal Hill made with them.

"Don't you worry that they may rebel?" asked Oro, who apparently could not hide his feelings, "You know that they're not unfamiliar with betrayal."

"That also depends on what they can get," Hill turned to Earl Quinn, "I promised them the identity of freemen in your name. If you successfully become the King of Dawn, they'll be rid of the unstable life and become the citizens of the City of Glow under your protection."

Horford could not help frowning and said, "Although the Rats are indeed hated and despised by most people, the real reasons why they are degenerates are because of poverty and hunger, rather than the recognition of others. If this isn't changed, even though I can spare them of past crimes, the new identity is useless for them. They'll become Rats again sooner or later."

"Since these people are willing to take such a risk to get an identity, they're not stupid or lazy. Maybe they just lack an opportunity." Hill replied casually, "As for the cause of degeneration... Rest assured. When His Majesty's messengers come next time, you'll find that there are much more job opportunities than you expect, and you don't need to feed them... Because they'll feed themselves at that time."

The huge crowd walked through the market and entered Rising Sun Avenue. The wall of the Castle District was right before them.

Behind the stone wall was where the Moya family had lived for generations.

Looking at the palace and High Tower where the dawn shone, Horford suddenly became nervous. He had been the Prime Minister for over a decade and had experienced too many twists and turns. Except for the moments where he found that his daughter was a witch and Fenancy died of disease, he seldom felt

so unease. Today, he stood at the threshold of a new field out of luck.

Even though the real ruler would be the King of Graycastle while he would be just a king in name, the Quinn family would reach the pinnacle of nobles, which was, to become the royal family of a country!

He had disobeyed the advice of his ancestors, but he also made it possible for his family to reach a new summit.

In such a complicated mood, the old Earl could not help asking, "Is it really okay.. to let my daughter participate in this battle?"

"Of course, you may not know, but Andrea is no longer the noble lady who couldn't leave without your protection. She's now an outstanding combat witch and she'll fire the first shot of the siege. Hill smiled, "Please prepare your speech before the final attack. It's not to the Extraordinary warriors and Rats, but to the people who accompanied us here. Tell them that the new age of the Kingdom of Dawn is coming soon."

...

Andrea stood on the top floor of the belfry, observing the palace in the wind.

This was the only place in the inner city where she could overlook the stone wall of the royal palace, though it was about 600 meters away. From afar, it seemed that she could embrace the grand palace in a hug and the people in it were little ants.

For the Castle District, this was an absolute safe distance. Even a heavy catapult could not threaten the stone wall here.

From here, she would open a gap for the God's Punishment Witches in the battle.

Just then, she saw a red flame flying upwards over Rising Sun Avenue, which was a sign that indicated the start of the battle.

She took out the bolt rifle, which was specially made by Miss Anna, loaded the ten-bullet clip, opened the aiming lens, and raised the gun.

She saw a fully-armored knight.

Andrea took a deep breath and began to control the magic power in her body. It was a wonderful feeling. The magic power seemed to turn into a pair of gentle hands that lightly held her arms, elbows, and fingers. In such an embrace, she felt that she entered a mystical state, as tough as a rock and as light as a feather.

The former made the weapon in her hands undisturbed, while the latter made her become part of the wind, swaying gently with the breeze touching her cheeks. When the two combined into one, Andrea snapped the trigger—

With a great roar and heat, the high-speed revolving bullet flew out of the barrel and fell toward the stone wall!

Chapter 939: Andrea the Marksman

Without bothering to check the result, Andrea pointed to the next target with the aiming lens.

The magic power consumed in precise shooting varied with the difficulty of the shooting. The more difficult the target was, the more magic power she had to consume.

That meant that her magic power, which could have been sufficient for arrow or stone shooting for two to four hours, would be exhausted in about eight minutes from shooting from such a long distance.

She had to shoot as many bullets as she could.

Her ability responded to her will.

Andrea felt that she was dancing rather than shooting. The adjustment of the gun, the rising and falling of her arm, and every movement of her body seemed to integrate with the world in harmony.

Shooting at every breath, Andrea soon used up ten bullets and immediately changed to a new clip. The whole process was as smooth as water and as proficient as a well-prepared performance.

However, it was not so easy for the people on the stone wall.

Death was flying to Appen's army within seconds, while they were completely unaware of it.

The knight who was commanding the mercenaries to adjust the crossbow machines became the first victim.

The shooting range of these crossbow machines was about 120 meters, and the cast-iron arrows would easily penetrate the large shields and armors of knights within 30 meters. This weapon could be described as the best weapon for defending the palace in terms of a normal attack.

In order to withstand the monster soldiers of extraordinary strength, Appen had ordered them to move all inventory from the warehouse on the wall. Eight crossbow machines were arranged on the wall segment that directly faced Rising Sun Avenue. Considering the limited width of the avenue, any invader, no matter how strong he was, could not hide from the intensive shooting of the iron crossbows.

The mercenaries heard a muffled sound and saw the knight who had been giving orders fall silently back onto the ground, with his chest sunk in.

"Someone is attacking!" A warning immediately came from the top of the wall.

They drew their swords but failed to find out where the attack came from.

Followed by the second and third attack—

Death raised his Scythe again and again. The guards constantly fell, while the enemy did not appear. An inexplicable fear overwhelmed them. Death was not surprising for these people who had been used to fighting all their life, but it was a different story when they could do nothing but wait for death.

Especially for a few mercenaries who were confident about their abilities.

They found that their increasingly proficient skills were useless as their opponent did not even give them a chance to counterattack. Clumsy servants or experienced knights were no different in the face of such an unexpected attack. They saw their enemies in the Hermes battle at least, while they were just waiting for the call of Death this time.

Less than a minute later, over twenty people were killed on the wall segment. Upon hearing the painful moaning of the wounded, most people were about to collapse.

"Look for cover. There is a witch!"

Just then, the order of the chief knight somewhat woke them up, "As long as we hide behind the battlements and big logs, we can avoid the attack! Bring out the God's Punishment Arrows and shoot toward any possible direction to force that damn witch out!"

Andrea also noticed the change on the stone wall.

A knight wearing golden-lined armor seemed to be commanding their actions. Those guards were moving closer to him and hiding behind various obstacles while shooting arrows without targets. Some of them even threw arrows by hands. Their purpose was obvious.

The actions of the enemy were not threatening to her at all. However, if she could not completely destroy the enemy, it would hinder the actions of the God's Punishment Witches in the siege.

The position of the commander was a blind zone for Andrea from the belfry. She could faintly see his arm, which was out of the battlement, and a small part of his helmet.

Usually, it was impossible for her to hit such a target; however, she had a different idea since watching the First Army's cannon show.

Andrea constantly drew the magic power to fill her arms. Pushed by the invisible hands, the gun in her hand continued to rise up until it pointed to the sky.

When the familiar feeling of harmony appeared again, she pulled the trigger without hesitation.

At that moment, Andrea felt that she saw the trajectory of the bullet. It was thrown high in the air but did not lose all speed after passing the apex. On the contrary, it dived toward the target with forward momentum. Although the distance between the two was about 600 meters, it had flown a longer distance in the air, so the time for this bullet was much longer than the previous ones she

shot.

Then she lowered the barrel, aimed at the knight's helmet and fired. The second bullet arrived earlier and accurately hit the edge of the battlement. Bricks immediately splashed, and the deformed bullet spun to hit the upper part of the helmet and knocked it away. The huge impact made the knight lose his balance and fall forward, and exposed his soft neck.

At the same time, the first bullet arrived and, as expected, pierced into his skin from an angle, and fractured his cervical vertebra into several sections. The chief knight had no time to react. He just heard a muffled sound behind his head, felt the chill on his neck, and then lost consciousness.

This shot almost consumed all the rest magic power of Andrea. A strong sense of dizziness overwhelmed her and the consequence of excessive consumption made her hands tremble. She even had difficulty holding the butt of the gun.

Nevertheless, the fall of the chief knight also became the last straw for the mercenaries. The defensive line of the stone wall immediately collapsed. Everyone turned around and ran toward the stairs, lest they would become the next target of death. No one even paid any attention to the big logs, hot oil, and crossbow machines, which were seen by the God's Punishment Witches.

"Woo————"

The horn for attacking was sounded.

Elena, who was in the siege team, rushed in first. In addition to carrying her commonly used tools, she brought a bundle of hemp rope in her hand.

Just as she approached the foot of the wall, she threw the rope. At the end of the rope, she had tightly tied a square-shaped hook.

A moment later, there were several "hanging cables" available for climbing the stone wall. The stone wall, which was about five

meters high, was difficult for common people, but in the eyes of the God's Punishment Witches, it was a fence which they could directly climb over. Elena casually climbed to the top of the wall via the hemp rope only to find out the Castle District had been a mess.

The supervising and preparatory teams arranged by Appen did not play their roles. Just when the guards on the stone wall were defeated, the guards of Earl Luoxi suddenly drew their swords toward the guard team of the Kingdom of Dawn. The guards on the stone wall wanted to run away as soon as possible, so the three parties created chaos on the spot.

Elena raised her lips, took out the huge sword on her back, and leaped over the stone wall.

No one could withstand her frontal blows. As long as they were included in the range of the giant sword, the enemies were severely wounded or killed. By her power alone, she created a path in the crowd.

As the God's Punishment Witches joined the battlefield, Earl Quinn had the situation well in hand.

Chapter 940: Fading Past

"Earl Luoxi! That damn traitor, how dare he —!" Appen, who was watching the battle from the top of the castle, furiously said, "I'm going to kill him and his son! Ministers, where are my ministers?"

"Your Majesty, Lord Kerlong said earlier that he was going to... handle some things," after a while, the chief guard hesitated to reply, "but I think... he may not be back."

"What did you say?" The King of Dawn turned suddenly and gasped at the latter.

"You agreed," said the chief guard hesitatively. "In addition to Lord Kerlong, Lord Wirant and 'Gold Hourglass' Neal also left. Your Majesty, everyone is gone but me."

It was only then that Appen noticed that only the chief guard and several servants were in the huge hall.

He instantly understood what the chief guard meant by saying "may not be back."

"Traitors!" He threw the scepter to the ground and said, gnashing his teeth, "Traitors, traitors... My reign is ruined by these traitors."

He consented to their departure indeed, but what were their reasons? One said that he was going to check the defense of the stone wall, another said that he was going to the inner court to supervise the maids preparing for war. Those were originally their duty, but they now turned out to be their excuses!

Were his ministers ready to flee before the enemy had launched their attack?

"Your Majesty, those cowards are bound to be punished in the end, but the immediate priority now is to withdraw from here as soon as possible!" The chief guard approached and said, "Those mercenaries won't win us much time. Even the imperial guards could not withstand the enemy for over an hour. It'll be too late

then!"

"No, I want to see the traitors be punished!" Said Appen, pushing the chief guard away, "Go to the underground cell and bring the head of Otto Luoxi to me!"

"But..."

"This is your king's command!" He yelled at the top of his voice.

"Yes, Your Majesty," the chief guard took a step back and bowed.

After his only subordinate left, Appen felt that his fingers were slightly trembling, and his eyes seemed to swell and even his vision was covered by a layer of light red.

He slowly sat on his chair and stared at his hands, hoping to tear the traitors alive!

It was over.

When the mercenaries on the top of the city wall fled for no reason and gave up the stone wall, his failure had been assured. The rebellion of Earl Luoxi was insignificant. But he could not understand why Earl Luoxi would risk losing his eldest son to betray him. Why would Horford Quinn get the complete support of the other two families? He was unable to explain it. Though the three families in the City of Glow were seen as a whole, their respective interests were not exactly the same. In this challenge which might cost their lives, he could not figure out who would be trusted by them to such a degree.

Appen found that he did not know the city or the three families so deeply as he had thought.

In the end, he did not get the answer of the chief guard.

A team of warriors, whom he had never seen before, opened the hall door. Their weapons were still dripping blood, and their armor was also splashed with blood stains. However, there was no trace of exhaustion on their face. They were so relaxed, as if they

had just gone through a street fight.

The chief guard declared that they could resist for an hour, but, in reality, they failed to even hold out for a quarter of an hour.

The rebellion had overwhelming superiority.

Then he saw the usurper, Horford Quinn, who had vowed to always support the Moya family.

In addition to Earl Quinn, two other traitors entered the hall together, along with their successors: Oro Tokat and Otto Luoxi.

When he saw the latter, Appen knew that the revenge he wanted had become impossible.

"Why is this—"

"Are you surprised as to why Otto is still alive?" Oro interrupted him, "It's not too hard to hide two warriors in the secret path of the palace, not to mention that the ordinary iron gates and fences could not stop their actions. As for how they got into the Castle District, you'd have to go to ask the guards. I don't think those guards, in their panic, may care much about the members of an acrobatics troupe ."

Appen's pupils suddenly shrank. "If that's not a bluff, does that mean that they could have entered my bedroom at any time?"

"Yes, just as what you think." Oro spread out his hands and said, "The King of Graycastle needed to create a tribute; otherwise, you would have already been beheaded by them. To be honest, I'm so disappointed in you, Your Majesty... I thought you imprisoned Otto just out of anger. I had never expected that you would use him to threaten Earl Luoxi and even intend to kill him." He sighed and continued to say, "I had thought... Even if we're not friends anymore, you would not forget the days when we were."

"You mean Roland Wimbledon? So that was all his doing?" Appen did not care about the second half of Oro's words, as "King of Graycastle" mentioned by Oro had attracted all his attention. He

said, "Do you know what you're doing? You're helping a demon. You not only betrayed your ancestors' vows but also sacrifice your kingdom and subjects to him! You're foolish!"

He pointed angrily to Horford Quinn, "And you! Do you think you can really sit on this throne? In fact, you're just a puppet! Haven't you thought about it? Why did he start the mutiny? Why did he fight against me if he were not attempting to annex the Kingdom of Dawn? Don't forget, since these people can easily overthrow me today, they'll easily push you into the abyss one day!"

"You're wrong," suddenly a woman from outside said, "he did it for two reasons, to save Otto and to protect the witches."

"Absurd—" Appen was ready to scold her presumption and ignorance, but his voice was suddenly stuck in his throat, "You, you're..."

She seemed to be very weak and could not stand up without the help of others. Even so, her superior beauty could not be hidden. Her long blonde hair and vaguely familiar face reminded him of a person who only existed in his memory.

"Andrea Quinn," her reply confirmed his guess. "It's been a long time since we met, Appen."

For a second, all the questions in his mind were answered. The reason why the Tokats supported Earl Quinn and why Earl Luoxi took risks—indeed, there was one person who could gain the trust of both families at the same time. That was because both of their children had been in love with her.

The anger in his heart was quenched and replaced by desperation all of a sudden. He murmured for a moment and finally asked, "Why?"

Why did you finally choose them and not me?

If I'm doomed to be defeated by Roland Wimbleton, why did you

also betray me? I can give you more than he does. If it were not for that accident, you would have ruled the kingdom with me.

Andrea seemed to read his mind and replied, "Because I'm a witch, Appen. A Fallen who deserves to be killed in your mind."

Chapter 941: Baring his Soul

Appen suddenly froze.

In other words, that accident years ago was a lie specifically set up by Earl Quinn to cover up the fact that his daughter became a witch?

Andrea was a demonic Fallen one all along...

He never knew...

But the fact remained that the ones who murdered his father and brought destruction to his kingdom were indeed witches. If it weren't for their unimaginable abilities, the current situation would be totally different.

His wish to avenge his father... was it wrong?

The two thoughts were colliding in Appen's mind, bringing him an unbearable headache.

"Your rule ends now." Earl Quinn came forward. "No matter what, the Kingdom of Dawn must not continue to act according to your will. The witches will get their deserved recognition and obtain the same status and rights as the common people. They will be able to walk the streets freely, hold official positions, claim inheritances from their families, and even govern this kingdom." He paused for a moment and looked at Andrea. "As for you—"

"What, do you intend to kill a member of the royal family?" Appen glared at him with a ferocious scowl. "Did you forget your oath to your ancestors? Did you forget my family name?! Answer me, Horford Quinn!"

His sharp questioning made everyone who was present retreat a step in fear—except for Andrea and the God's Punishment Witches.

"I am a direct descendant of the royal house of Moya and the one and only heir! Even if I am no longer a king, you will carry the title

of Kingslayer from now on!" he shouted, "The order of the Kingdom of Dawn will be destroyed by you and the great noble families will never trust you again!"

"I won't kill you," Horford sighed, "If my family wasn't at stake, I would have never chosen to act like this. But you need to swear to leave the Kingdom of Dawn forever and never come back. This way, you can take whoever you want with you and leave the king's city. The only alternative is that I imprison you in the castle's dungeon, just like what you did to the eldest son of the Luoxi family."

"Is this decision supported by all three big families?"

"The Tokat family doesn't have any objections." Earl Tokat touched his chest.

"The Luoxi family agrees as well." Earl Luoxi continued.

"We aren't as cold-hearted as you," Oro Tokat said, "Fortunately, your order was one step too late, or else..."

"Enough," Otto interrupted him, "Say no more."

"Such a group of considerate people. But when faced with the huge differences in power, how long will you be able to sustain such a ridiculous friendship?" Appen gazed at the nobles in the hall coldly and thought for a long time before saying, "I choose the first option."

He could not let himself be imprisoned in a place where he might never see daylight again. As long as he was alive, he would always be a member of the royalty of the Kingdom of Dawn. Whether it was the Kingdom of Wolfheart or the Kingdom of Everwinter, he would still be treated according to his status. Leaving was preferable to being held in a cage. And it was impossible to guarantee that neither Horford Quinn nor the King of Graycastle would ever make a mistake. So once a dispute eventually arose, the nobles from the other territories would definitely remember his

existence.

"Then... please take an oath." Earl Quinn nodded.

Once Appen Moya finished his oath in the name of the ancestors, the matter was finally resolved. But only Andrea noticed that when the guards escorted the King of Dawn out of the hall, Elena, who was supporting her, had a cold smile on her face.

While leaving the castle, Otto suddenly called Andrea from behind, "Andr... Miss Quinn...thank you for saving my life. Mister Hill told me in general about what happened in Neverwinter City."

She smiled and asked, "Why are you being so formal with your savior and once childhood friend?"

"No... I'm just—" Otto was struck speechless for a moment, his eyes revealing a somewhat happy expression.

"Then call her big sister!" Oro came forward and grabbed his neck. "Don't forget who the leader among the four of us was back then, unless of course, you want to take her position!"

"Oro!" Otto struck the latter's chest with his elbow.

"Ahem, fine, I'm just joking around because you were too tense..." Oro acted as if he was hurt. "It's been so long since we last met. Today, the Flower of Glow is back with us, we must have a good gathering tonight. How about at our usual old place?"

"The Silver Antler Tavern?" Andrea raised her eyebrows. "That place still exists?"

"It is, after all, a Luoxi family business. It won't close so easily. The manager is quite incapable though."

"Hey—"

"I don't have a problem."

"Then it's decided. I'll leave you two alone for now. I have somewhere to be." Oro waved.

"An, Andrea..." Otto took a deep breath. "I want to talk to you in private."

Even though he didn't know why his old friend was willing to let go of such a chance to catch up with Andrea, for him this was an extremely rare opportunity.

He did not want to borrow Oro's words anymore to tell her that he had missed her. And he could feel the difference in Andrea's attitude from the time they met in Neverwinter city. Even though it seemed like she was still in conflict with her identity as a lady of the Quinn family, at least she did not treat her childhood friends as strangers. This was obvious from the way she had smiled before.

"..." Andrea thought for a moment and then nodded. "Let's go to the courtyard."

Otto felt his heart suddenly beating faster.

The person supporting her did not follow them, so the two of them, one behind another, walked into the courtyard.

"Are... are you alright?" Looking at the witch's back, which was shaking as she was walking, Otto wanted to but did not dare to help her. These kinds of gestures had been so common back when they were children.

"This is just a side-effect of excessive use of magic power, it's not really harmful to the body. Actually, we all have to go through this in order to improve our magic capacity. I'll be back to normal in two days so don't worry," Andrea said while shrugging her arms, "It's just the two of us now, what would you like to talk about?"

Otto bit his lips. "Do you still remember what I told you in Neverwinter city? That Oro would go to your grave every year and leave flowers..."

"I remember."

"In fact, there's one more thing that I didn't tell you..." He took a

deep breath. "I also did the same every year—because I couldn't forget you. Back at the dungeon, when I heard you saying 'I am here', I almost can't describe the feeling of joy that I felt in my heart. At that moment, I decided that no matter what, I have to say this to you. Andrea, can you stay here?"

Andrea didn't seem surprised. She only smiled and said, "Thank you, but you are too late."

"What do you mean by too late..."

"I already have someone I want to always stay beside, so... I won't be staying in the City of Glow." She replied seriously in a soft and quick manner, "If you had asked me ten years ago, maybe I would have agreed."

Otto's heart sank. "Is it His Majesty Roland? If you mean him, then he's definitely a better choice than me..."

"I would never compete against Nightingale," Andrea interrupted him, "I am her most trusted ally."

"Huh?"

"Um, no, nevermind..." She coughed twice. "Well, it's not what you think. Otto, witches can't continue the family bloodline and in fact, I don't want to be restricted by the rules of nobility. Ten years is a long time. I'm no longer the Flower of Glow that you used to know. It's better like this, do you understand?"

Otto opened his mouth and was about to say "I'm willing to give up everything about the nobility", but there was an invisible force that stopped him before he could.

He was also not a capricious child anymore, who could just avoid taking any responsibilities.

It would be the greatest disappointment for his father and sister Belinda.

In the end, Otto could only watch as Andrea's back disappeared

through the courtyard's entrance.

Chapter 942: Only A Mortal

Two days later.

Palace of the City of Glow.

"You're leaving today? Can't you stay here a little longer?" Horford Quinn, with mixed feelings in his heart, looked at Andrea, who had come to bid him farewell. "Otto and the others must also want to spend a bit more time with you."

"It's been a long time since I left Neverwinter city, and there are people waiting for me there," Andrea said frankly. "Today is the day that the old regime of the Kingdom of Dawn will be replaced by the new one. Considering their identity as their families' heirs, they shouldn't be wasting time on banquets and games. Since we are friends, meeting once is enough already."

"She has indeed changed," Earl thought to himself.

She has matured.

"About the subsequent negotiations with Graycastle... Do you have any suggestions?"

"I don't know much about government affairs—in Neverwinter city, the ones who are responsible for them aren't the nobles but rather freemen, after passing some kind of examination. If you want to know more details, you'd better talk to Hill Fawkes. He has always been in contact with the Western Region." Andrea paused for a moment. "If you want my advice, don't make the same mistake as Appen."

Horford revealed a wry smile. "Continuing to resist Graycastle even after personally experiencing the power that Roland Wimbledon possesses, that would be quite stupid."

"It's not only about that..." Andrea shook her head. "The upcoming Battle of Divine Will concerns the fate of all of humanity, so any infighting between us would only accelerate our

destruction—no matter whether it's Graycastle or the Kingdom of Dawn, none of us can survive alone in this upcoming calamity. So you have to keep in mind what will be more beneficial for our families."

"It's in our best interests to survive." Horford quickly understood the meaning of his daughter's words.

"As for our hope to survive, it now lies entirely with His Majesty Roland." She waved her hands and said, "So maintain order in the Kingdom of Dawn and cooperate together with Graycastle to get through the Battle of Divine Will. That is my only advice."

Earl Quinn nodded slowly. "...I understand."

Just as Andrea turned around, he stopped her once again.

"I..."

"You don't need to see me off, there are still many things you have to do today. And you don't need to worry about my safety, the God's Punishment Witches will be coming back with me to Neverwinter," she said without turning around.

"No, I wanted to say... I'm sorry, my dear daughter." When he said those words, Horford suddenly felt a lot older, but his heart felt like it was relieved of a great burden. In fact, he had so much more to say. Such as how sending her away at that time was indeed for the sake of the family but it was also to protect her. Or how much he regretted not discussing that issue with his wife. If he had a chance to choose again, he probably wouldn't have acted as harshly as he had. And finally, how happy he felt when he found out from Otto that she still alive and well...

However, Earl Quinn understood that the damage was already done. No matter what he said now, it would only sound like an excuse, nothing more than made-up words. This was the price of his decision. Andrea had now become so mature, he couldn't act too badly in front of her.

Without saying anything else, the old earl closed his eyes.

"Well... I'll be going then."

His daughter's steps slowly faded away and finally disappeared from his ears. Though he did not hear the word 'Father' that he yearned so much for, at the same time, he could feel that her attitude was not as cold as before. At least, she no longer addressed him as Lord Earl.

This was acceptable too, he thought. After all, this is just a temporary goodbye. They would have the chance to meet again in the future.

Time heals all wounds.

His decision ten years ago had made him lose so much.

But Horford Quinn was determined to use the same amount of time to redeem himself.

Leaving Whitewave Bay, the ship entered the sea.

Appen put down the map in his hands and looked out from the porthole.

This route was one of the main commercial routes to the Wavelight Port of the Kingdom of Wolfheart. From time to time, one could see merchant ships coming and going. Occasionally, some fishermen's boats would approach them trying to sell some fresh fish and vegetables.

If he was still the king, the ships sailing around him should have been three-masted galleons flying the imperial flags, and if he wished to eat some fresh food, he would be naturally served by his maids.

Those damn traitors were to blame for everything!

It had been a week since he was brought down from his throne. During this time, he could not stop thinking about the day of his

fateful return. Even if he couldn't do anything to the King of Graycastle, he would never let the three big families enjoy his city and the fruits of their rebellion.

After careful consideration, Appen finally chose his first destination—the Thousand Blade Fort of the Kingdom of Wolfheart. That place was right next to the borders of the Kingdom of Dawn, and it was rumored that its Lord had blood relations with the nobility of the Kingdom of Dawn. So he would not be too harsh on the Moya family. But most importantly, due to the close relations between the nobles residing in both the kingdoms, if his identity was ever to be needed, then they would be able to easily contact him.

Those Lords were always conspiring against each other, but at the end of the day, everyone only cared for their own benefits. Since he was no longer the ruler of the City of Glow, their interests would not be in conflict.

Furthermore, his lineage could actually come in handy for achieving their new interests.

For the sake of revenge, Appen decided to suppress his feelings of chagrin for now. When the time was right, he would make everyone who underestimated him pay dearly!

Thinking about that, he started to cheer up. At the same time, he felt a sense of hunger.

It would be nice to have some fruits now as the ships on this route would become more scarce as they left the Kingdom of Dawn's coasts. He had just heard the sound of a fishing boat docking with his boat.

Appen shook the thin string on his table, which was connected to a bell outside. Whenever it rang, the maid would have to come in.

Yet, there was no response from the outside this time.

His eyebrows were instantly raised.

He could not believe that he had fallen so low that even his maid would dare to be lazy. He felt the urge to murder someone rising.

Fine, because of her negligence she could serve as an example. Among his group of followers, other than the Moya family members and his loyal knights, the rest of them really needed to be taught a lesson.

He had to let them know that even on a ship, as long they were in his presence, they had to act like they were in the palace.

Appen exited the room but found no one outside. Not only the maids but even the sailors, his guards, the slaves... nobody was left. The cabin was strangely silent, and the only thing that could be heard were the waves crashing against the ship.

He suddenly felt a cold sweat running down his spine.

Something was wrong!

Was he abandoned? No... that was impossible. Even if the mercenaries and the servants wanted to leave, his loyal knights that were trained by his family would have definitely stopped them. Not to mention there should have been at least some noise due to a dispute!

Appen decided to climb out of the hold onto to the deck to have a look. There should still be some sailors there no matter what. Just as he was about to turn around, he saw a bloodstained dagger being pointed at his neck.

The one holding the dagger was an extremely ugly woman, but with eyes as bright as stars.

Appen instantly realized that she did not belong to the ship crew. He would have noticed a person with such distinguishing features.

She must be an intruder!

"Who sent you? Do you know what are you doing, lowlife? I am the King of Dawn, the Moya family's—"

His voice suddenly stopped.

He realized he could no longer breathe through his throat, it was clogged by the gushing blood. A striking pain starting from his neck spread down his chest and a coldness swept through his body, taking away all of his strength.

As he fell down, he only heard a whisper above his head.

"Well, you are only a mortal after all."

Chapter 943: The Spread Blackflame

"All clear?"

While looking at Zooey, who was walking down the deck, Elena asked.

"Yes, it took some time." Zooey wiped the fresh blood on her face. "Luckily it's all cleared now."

"What are we going to do next?" Betty asked, shrugging, "Write a report to His Majesty, Roland?"

"Leave it to Elena. I'm not good at summarizing. After all, His Majesty didn't take it very seriously. He only told us to maintain the stability of the situation with whatever necessary means. Just write Appen as a man who resisted change and was full of evil intentions. Such a person is better off dead."

"That's the truth," Betty said as if she thought this over already. "If he had no evil intentions, why would he choose a border town nearest to the Kingdom of Dawn?"

"His Majesty may not take it seriously, but we can't do the same." Elena cleared her throat. "I'll lay out all the details about the cause and effect, and the analysis basis, including what you just said—just like a record of a meeting in the City Hall."

"I bet you just want to get His Majesty's compliment to win a few more visits to his Dream World." Zooey rolled her eyes and said.

"Wha-what did you say!"

"Really? Why didn't I think of that..." Betty looked at Elena with excitement. "Can you teach me how to write an official report?"

"Um... let's see." Elena coughed drily. "Let's get the work done first."

"Right." Zooey put away her mocking look. "But don't put what we've just said in your report."

"I know." Elena looked at the other end of the deck and waved at a few men in black robes. "Come here."

The lead man, supported by another two men by their hands, walked to the witches and bowed. "Lady Oracle, what can I do for you?"

"Since you were willing to follow me here, it means you're fully prepared, right?" Elena asked seriously.

The old man was none other than the founder of "Black Money," the legendary merchant of City of Glow, Banach Lothar. Although the God's Punishment Witches were incomparable in terms of combat capacity, they still needed the assistance of common people in such a matter as intercepting Appen on the sea and making sure his death could not be traced back to Graycastle.

To a common person, regicide was an unimaginable crime, especially when it was to terminate the whole royal bloodline. Ridiculous as it was, even wealth, no matter how enormous it was, was no match for such worship of descent, which was shown from Banach's shivering shoulders. Nevertheless, he still managed to make a move, indicating his ambition abundantly clear.

"Yes... I'm willing to serve you."

"Take it easy." Elena patted his shoulder with satisfaction. "In the deities' eyes, the identities of common people are meaningless. What's the big deal about a king? It's nothing but a title. Tell me, what do you plan to do next?"

Banach eased up a bit. "Among the three plans, I'm in favor of the first. I think to disguise it as a shipwreck is the safest method. Each year, along this route, dozens of ships sink for various reasons like a rainstorm, tsunami, stranding, etc. What's more, on the sea along the borderline, there'll be a rainstorm two days later. We only need to drive the ship further into the sea and dig a hole in its bottom. Nobody will know what exactly happened."

He gasped and added, "As for disguising it as a pirate robbery or noble's revenge, I think they aren't unreasonable. Although we could divert people's suspicion to certain targets, false facts won't hold under intense investigation after all. Even if people fail to find any trace, those nobles could just produce some flaws by themselves."

"So for the shipwreck, you can make all the clues vanish?" Zooey asked coldly.

"Yes, my Lady," Banach said with a determination. "Even the sailors I brought with me will disappear with the ship. They are the silent warriors raised by Black Money to clean things up. There is no way the information will leak out."

"Silent warriors?" Elena looked at the two servants beside him. "Are those two among them?"

"Yes. They can't hear, nor speak, and need to be given specific gestures to be commanded. That's why they're called silent warriors."

"They must have paid a hell of a price..." Elena knew how troublesome it was to train a deaf-mute into a warrior. At best, the success rate was only one out of ten, given that the trainees were actually in fairly good conditions. But how did an underground Chamber of Commerce find so many well-conditioned deaf-mutes? They probably chose well-conditioned men then turned them into deaf-mutes with medicine.

Of course, she did not care how common people treated other common people. Even in the era of the Union, they had never stopped bullying people weaker than them.

"This time I took 50 silent warriors with me, who take orders from nobody but me. They're more than enough to take care of those sailors. So this plan is perfectly safe." Banach said while bowing.

"Alright, just do it." Elena looked at Zooey and Betty. "But I have one more thing for you to do."

The old businessman swallowed his own saliva. "As long as it's in my ability, I'll spare no effort."

If it were only to create an "accident", she did not have to conceal it from His Majesty Roland, but the following order was not from Roland but Pasha.

"It's simple. 'Black Money' has made contact with the new King of the Kingdom of Dawn, Horford Quinn. On the one hand, the Chamber of Commerce will continue to appear supporting him, on the other hand, you need to input as many as informants as you can into his new regime to observe the Quinn Family's acts and moves. Do you understand?"

"But... isn't he the puppet supported by you?" Banach asked confusedly.

"Just in case. After all, common people have a short and fragile determination. When the real challenge comes, who can guarantee the puppet will behave as loyal as he should?" Elena paused. "Besides, it's not reliable to rely on one family to manage the Kingdom of Dawn. I hope your 'Black Money' can be a part of it."

If a person had always yearned for power, he would be extremely exhilarated at such a hint, yet Banach did not show much of joy. He asked worriedly, "This is a long-term plan and I'm able to do this, but, as you know, my physical condition..."

Elena took out two bottles from behind her and handed them over to the old man. "Take them. Drink them when you don't feel well. But remember, don't drink them within the month of each other. With another six bottles of this, your body will meet the basic criteria for modification."

Excitement filled with Banach's eyes. He anxiously took over the bottles and put them into his pockets carefully. Deeply bowing, he

said in excitement, "I guarantee the success of the mission!"

"Work hard. When it's done, we'll turn you into an immortal."
Elena said softly.

Chapter 944: The New Witch Group Part I

Roland felt relieved while he received the message that the rescue mission had succeeded.

Although they failed to take control of the Kingdom of Dawn as a conqueror, after a little deviation from their original plan, the neighboring country at least overthrew the Moya Family's rule and basically maintained stability. Before the Quinn Family could thoroughly gain a firm foothold, it would remain Graycastle's most faithful ally.

Besides, Andrea was also in Neverwinter. If everything went smoothly, the alliance with the Kingdom of Dawn could at least last until the next generation.

Roland did not believe the third Battle of Divine Will would last for a century.

Andrea, along with the other God's Punishment Witches in the expedition, was estimated to return to the Western Region in about a month. Roland intended to make use of this time to make a sound plan for Graycastle's future development.

After all, with the destruction of Timothy's remnants, the counterforce had temporarily disappeared and the kingdom was integrated in name. Although it would take some time before the secondary City Halls in the various cities to take effect and make Graycastle a highly efficient authoritarian country, he could already start to prepare for it. When the time came, the strength of Graycastle would enjoy an unprecedented leap, lifting it to a whole different level from the other three countries.

The key point in his development plan was to put the witches' abilities into full play.

After all, they were the reason for Neverwinter's high productivity.

Within half a month after Anna's return, the city had enjoyed a series of changes, with the most prominent ones happening in the castle. His mahogany desk was double its former size; on the desk were over 10 wind-up telephones connecting with the Witch Building office, the City Hall, the barracks, the Third Border City, Longsong Stronghold, and so on. In case of emergencies, the guards did not have to run to deliver messages anymore.

Furthermore, the first public telephone appeared in the central square, connecting the city with Misty Forest. It extended with the building of railways and satisfied the workers' demand to communicate with their families as they could not meet face to face over a long period of time.

Of course, the fare for using this telephone was time-based, and the number of people to use it was limited and application must be made in advance. If one found it pricey, one could choose to use carrier pigeons or railways to deliver their messages. Thanks to the popularization of preliminary education, text-based communication in Neverwinter had become increasingly popular.

In charge of the operation of these systems was the Ministry of Communications, a newly established department in the City Hall.

Its work covered every link of the delivery process, from taking care of carrier pigeons to providing home delivery, as a result, its subdivisions instantly grew to a colossal size which was only second to the Ministry of Construction. It offered about a thousand jobs and almost all the newly graduated Neverwinter civilians were taken in.

Through this department, Roland could vaguely see the silhouette of a future large group.

That was merely the result of Anna's own ability.

After solving the problem of demon's attack, Roland put most of his efforts on the statistics work of the witches' abilities from Sleeping Island.

With the arrival of the second batch of migrants, 96 witches had joined the Sleeping Spell. To test their abilities alone was stressful enough for Wendy and Scroll. Besides, not all witches were cooperative, which made the first step of data collecting quite difficult. Luckily, with Tilly's prestige and Wendy's conciliation, the registration work was more or less finished smoothly.

The black notebook in front of Roland was the result of the preliminary examinations of all the witches' abilities.

He had read it over and over in the past few days and figured out the uses of most of the witches' abilities.

Now he felt that the former way of classifying the witches' abilities as intensifying, summoning, and attaching magic type was too rough and unfit for expressing their usages directly. Hence, he reclassified the witches by their work assignments. For example, witches good at processing were classified as manufacturing type; witches who were pro animals were classified as the cultivating type; witches whose abilities had not found a usage were put under the type of undetermined. Thus the City Hall could clearly see the number of witches which could be employed for production work.

Besides, this batch of witches had shown Roland how drastically different their abilities could be.

Although they were all Awakeneds, some of them could make flowers bloom from a crack in a stone and some could create big and tall Magic Servants. It was no wonder the Union could not withstand a long term war, because if a combat witch died, it would take years before the role she played could be replaced.

Obviously, the most reliable arrangement for a witch was to put her in a factory.

Among the list of nearly 100 witches, Roland put special emphasis on four of them.

They were No. 26 Darkcloud, No. 43 Azima, No. 44 Doris, and

No. 89 Slimwrist.

Darkcloud's ability was to dye. She could dye any object she laid her hands on into any color she wanted it to be, without changing its original nature.

Theoretically, it was an ability of attaching magic. Its effective time was limited, its consumption was closely related to the target's size, and its effect was free from the influence of God's Stone of Retaliation. But Darkcloud's dyeing ability was so powerful that its effective time was strikingly long. This was probably because the change of color barely affected the object and she only needed to use a little bit of magic power for the dyeing effect to last for years. In other words, if Darkcloud exhausted her magic power, the dyeing effect could last for a century.

But the size of the object still mattered. She could not, like what Hummingbird did, release her ability in an instant and reduce its effective time, so if she ran into a large object beyond the upper limit of her magic power, her ability would not take effect. Things like changing color of the sea in one breath would be impossible for her.

In fact, according to Wendy's test, Darkcloud could affect an area with the length and width of two arms-length, roughly 1.5 square meters.

To Roland, such an area was big enough.

After all, an object could be divided and combined.

In a manner of speaking, Darkcloud's ability filled in a gap in Neverwinter—the dyeing technology. In the current era, the dyeing method mainly depended on extracting colors from nature, which in later ages would be a big selling point. But the truth was the performance of colors extracted from nature was terrible—too many impurities, fading easily, poor oxidation resistance, and too few varieties. As a result, only nobles could afford colorful clothes, and the colors mostly came from embedded gold and silver

threads.

Dyes had a broad usage. Apart from the traditional textile industry, other areas like education, printing, chemical, and biology all needed them. To some extent, Darkcloud could reduce the burden on Soraya's shoulders, which basically made her a great jack of all trades.

But witches No.43 and No.44 gave Roland a headache.

Azima and Doris were the kind of witches, according to Wendy, who were unwilling to cooperate. In the initial meeting, they had expressed their dissatisfaction about Tilly and wished to leave Neverwinter as soon as possible. Although this plan was temporarily put off by Scroll, the crack still existed. Whether the two wanted to be recruited and devoted to work remained unknown.

Unfortunately, their abilities were very peculiar—Azima's ability was "Source Tracing", although unique, yet not irreplaceable. But Doris's ability of "demonification" enabled Roland to see the possibility of using magic power on a large scale.

Chapter 945: The New Witch Group Part II

Simply speaking, Azima's ability could trace an entire object through a piece of it, or through a microelement to trace its concentrated spot.

Undoubtedly, for a Sleeping Island witch, this was a type of survival ability. For example, holding a drop of fresh water, Azima could find a creek or a lake; or judging from the kernel of a fruit from an animal's feces, she could estimate the fruit tree's location and size.

Due to the contribution her ability made to the team, quite a few Eastern Region witches gathered together under her leadership and made a tight group out of themselves.

In Roland's eyes, Source Tracing was undoubtedly the best way for discovering natural resources, whose general purposes were even broader than Sylvie's Eye of Magic.

The logic was simple. When Sylvie looked through the ground, her magic power consumption would drastically increase and her perception of distance would greatly decrease. She was totally qualified for marking ore beds in the North Slope Mine area, but perceiving mineral veins deeply buried was beyond her ability. Even for resources in superficial layers, she could barely tell their category or scale. She could only tell something was underground, but not what it was.

Roland did not worry about Azima in this aspect. She could not only know a single resource's exact location, but also its reserve. If her ability could be combined with Lucia's ability of purification, Roland might be able to mark the entire periodic table of elements on the map of Graycastle.

When Roland learned geology, what impressed him the most was a colorful national map marked with resources. Now that Graycastle had united under his banner, he should aim at

broadening his raw material sources to the entire country, or even to the Kingdom of Dawn, the Fertile Plains, etc.

Even if Azima was unwilling to help, it was not disastrous to Neverwinter. After all, the resources were not going anywhere. Given enough time, he could eventually succeed in his goal.

Yet Doris's enchantment ability was not the same.

Since he lacked good observing methods, Roland's research on magic power did not have a good start, which left the witches as his only source to harness magic powers.

Enchantment was an incredible ability.

In her notebook, Wendy described as the ability attach magic power to a dead object to recycle, thus greatly slowing down the object's exhaustion process and makes it look lifelike.

Roland had reservations about her ability description. He knew it was only the witches' customary expression that a dead object could not have magic power. Under most circumstances, this rule applied, with only one exception—the God's Stone of Retaliation.

The joint experiment carried out by Isabella and Agatha showed that God's Stone did have magic power, or... it at least had the ability to attract magic power, which was originally exclusive to the Awakened. When Isabella smoothed the area under the disturbance of a God's Stone, she could see extremely tiny magic power residues on its surface, although for only a few seconds. Throughout the entire process, no third party had injected more magic power into it, so those magic power residues must belong to the God's Stone itself.

In another word, unlike what he had expected, the God's Stone of Retaliation did not have high-density magic power which could disable other magic powers. But it did have magic power, only the amount was very little. As to how it isolated the effects of magic powers was to be discovered. One thing he could be sure of was

that "magic power was incompatible with dead objects" was not entirely true.

Considering a God's Stone could soon become a common stone after Isabella's adjustment, Agatha made a bold speculation: The magic power of the God's Stone of Retaliation would keep on running out, but it would also constantly absorb new magic powers as a living entity did, which formed a magic power circulation. Just like sand on a beach, which absorbed heat from sunlight and raised its temperature during the day and released the heat at night. This could explain why Isabella could completely alter the nature of a God's Stone without interfering with its structure.

Agatha also believed that Isabella "killed" the God's Stone.

Wendy's description was obviously made based on Agatha's conclusion.

Roland did not mind it. He still believed that the mineral vein of God's Stones was indeed dead objects. Whether an object could take in or push out magic power was not connected with whether it was dead or alive. The reason that they could not explain its working theory was that they knew too little, much like before the invention of the microscope, mankind knew nothing about the microworld.

In his eyes, enchantment was, in a manner of speaking, a kind of "conversion to God's Stone".

Of course, disregarding the theory, this ability was undoubtedly effective. According to the tests, it could take effects on targets as Magic Stones, Sigils, objects of enchantment, etc. Magic powers injected into them could be supplemented by itself, and create a circulation.

For instance, when Dawn I was fully injected with magic power, it could generate electricity for five consecutive days, but when Mystery Moon held Broken Sword, Dawn I's working time could be

prolonged by 10 more days. No matter what, the magic power injected in the bronze stick was constantly running away and would not stay forever in an enchanted object.

That meant even if Mystery Moon's magic power could reach the same level as Anna's, it could only sustain a few more Dawn I at the same time. It could barely satisfy the needs for the factory's illumination and the equipment's operation, let alone be put to use on a larger scale.

And a Dawn I enchanted by Doris could absorb the ubiquitous magic powers to compensate for its magic power consumption, therefore keeping the magnetic poles working. Although its loss and gain of magic power were not entirely equal, the improvement was still astonishing for a short-term enchantment.

It meant Mystery Moon could be relieved from the maintenance work of energy charging and become an energy manufacturer.

It also meant that, besides the factories, many other places could get stable electricity supply.

At the same time, many enchantment abilities, which were originally of little value, would gain purpose.

Additionally, Agatha and Isabella could get a pile of test targets similar to God's Stones, which would greatly help their research on magic power.

As for the issues with enchantments, such as taking too long to take effect, low efficiency, magic power circulation could be broken off by God's Stones, etc, were nothing compared to the ability itself.

So no matter what, Roland needed to keep such a witch.

After thinking it over, he felt the only strategy that could work was the sugarcoated-bullet.

—after all, in the art of tempting people, he had found no one who could do better than himself.

As for the last witch, No.89 Slimwrist, she was just like her name.

She was the daughter of a jeweler and was born to be good at carving. She not only had slim wrists but also flexible fingers which enabled her to carve complex patterns. After her awakening, her gift was greatly improved. Not only could she carve much faster, but could also carve on anything.

On first glance, Anna could easily do that with her Blackfire, but she was a genius who had gone through two revolutions. Even in the Union, she was among the top Senior Witches, a completely different level than Slimwrist.

What Roland liked about Slimwrist was that she could take some workload off of Anna. Besides, there could never be too many precision manufacture practitioners. Back on the Sleeping Island, she could only be a top craftswoman polishing jewelry for nobles, but in Neverwinter, she could propel the advancement of society together with the other witches.

Chapter 946: The Payment Problem

Roland closed the notebook and gently sighed.

The arrival of numerous Sleeping Island witches would undoubtedly instill the industry of Neverwinter with immeasurable vitality, yet... a few intractable problems lied in front of him,

with the toughest one being the issue of payment.

Those witches belonged to Sleeping Spell. Theoretically, they were under the leadership of Tilly, so whether they were willing to be employed was totally up to themselves. Although Tilly's attitude toward him had greatly improved, it was still hard for him to back up his former promise and make use of his connection with Tilly to propel the witches forward.

That was to say the position planning in the notebook was only his own intentions for the witches. To what extent those intentions could be realized was dependent on the number of witches who were willing to join in the tides of production.

To instill them with slogans like "labor is glorious" or "labor changes fate" would bring little effect, yet to boast the idea of "fighting for our homeland" seemed less meaningful. After all, to them, the only place which could be called their home was Sleeping Island.

Roland believed that anyone would fall in love with this city and take it as his or her home after living here for a few years, but it was not the right time yet—naturally, a newcomer would be cautious and suspicious of a strange, new place. He could not wait for a few years to pass before developing the industry, so he had to offer intriguing payment.

Simply speaking, there must be a desire that propelled them to work.

Prior to this, Roland had asked Tilly about the witches' payment. In Sleeping Island, the bounty service the witches offered to the Fjords merchants or explorers were quite costly, most of which cost between tens to hundreds of gold royals. Although Tilly used that money for basic living materials, the witches still got paid according to a primitive quota allocation system. They lived a fairly poor life, but it did not mean they had not seen much money.

Besides, nowadays 30% of the profits made from the Chaos Drink trade was at Tilly's disposal. It was predictable that she would take a small portion of it to improve the witches' living standard. In other words, even if a witch who chose not to work would not starve to death and could live a better life than the one on the island.

So a few extra gold royals might not be enough to get their interest.

Besides the low payment, there could be the issue of comparison. Most of the witches in the Witch Union were paid with one to three gold royals per month. Why would the outsiders get better paid? Even if Roland raise their payment as well, there could also be a criticism. Some witches might ask "our payments have been kept at the same level for almost two years, why do we get a raise as soon as the Sleeping Island witches arrived? Do senior witches like us have to depend on the newbies to get a salary raise?"

Even though the union members would not put it that way, Roland would rather not take that path.

At this thought, he could not help but look at the girl resting on the lounge chair reading a picture-story book—Nightingale.

Nightingale must have felt his gaze and turned over to ask, "What's wrong?"

A perfect curve.

"No, now is not the time." Roland cleared his throat and asked,

"How long have you been here?"

"Two years, 11 months, and 26 days." Nightingale sat up. "Why do you ask?"

So precise?

"If I remember correctly, your primary payment was two gold royals a month, right?"

"Ah, at the time," Nightingale showed an ambiguous smile and said, "that would be right. It was twice as Anna's payment. At first, I even refused it. Later under your repeated appeal, I, sort of, reluctantly agreed to be your guard."

"What appeal? You, after seeing Anna pass through her Day of Adulthood peacefully, went back to stop Cara but ended up having a falling out with her, then decided to stay!" Roland rolled his eyes internally. "But during your stay, have you felt that what you gain is not proportional to what you give, and at any point considered to leave?"

"What did you say?" The smile on her face froze and was replaced by a hint of anxiety. "Why...why would I leave?"

"No, it was just a figure of speech," realizing what he said could be easily misinterpreted, he hurriedly corrected himself. "The emphasis is the former half of my words. Are there witches who feel their payment is too low?"

After confirming that Roland was serious, Nightingale sighed in relief and flashed before his desk. "How is that possible? One gold royal is already half a year's income for a common person. We're not working harder than those workers, so our payment being 'out of proportion' is also out of the question. Besides, even if we get a large amount of money, we wouldn't know how to spend it. After all, we don't need to worry about making a living, which was out of our imagination in the old days."

"Perhaps not every witch thinks so..."

"Why not!?! If you don't believe me, you can ask Wendy," Nightingale said confidently. "She knows our fellow witches better than I do."

"Alright," Roland shrugged and said, "I need her opinion on another matter anyway."

"What matter?" Nightingale asked curiously.

"It's a secret, but soon you'll know," Roland answered with a smile.

...

"Your Majesty, I've never thought that!" Unexpectedly, Wendy's response was even more intense. "Even without payment, I'd have done my best to build this place. I used to say that Neverwinter is the new Holy Mountain to the witches, and the other sisters are also serving you with the same expectation! If the City Hall is in a shortage of money, I'd like to give you the gold royals I've saved."

"Um... alright, I'm only collecting opinions." Suddenly, Roland felt very touched by her remarks. Touching his nose, he turned away his head and asked, "Is there anything you want in particular?"

"This..." Wendy was startled, and Nightingale began to quickly blink to her. "If you must ask, I feel... that... perhaps... if each one of us could get one more bottle of Chaos Drinks every month... that'll be great."

"Do you agree?" Roland looked at Nightingale.

"Is this some sort of wishing game?" Nightingale gently smiled. "Since we're asked to freely express our wishes, I think two more bottles would be better."

"No doubt." He then had a rough framework of the reform of the witches' payment.

If there were things more valuable than money, it would be the

things that money could not buy. Evelyn's Complex Wine House was often visited by some witches, but its high pricing kept most of the witches out. They turned to the cheaper fruit wine—not because they could not afford visiting Evelyn's wine house, but their consumption stopped them from spending a large amount of gold royals on such luxuries.

Besides, the Chaos Drinks sold in the wine house were all old varieties. Their low sales made it very hard to replace the inventory, and their freshness could not be compared with the new products released each month.

What if I just change the Chaos Drinks from a welfare item to a special item to be purchased?

One can call it a points system or a dual currency system. But to entice the witches to work by rewarding them with something gold royals can't buy, won't it make the work itself more attractive? At the same time, it could perfectly avoid the witches' sense of unevenness brought by raising the payment.

Besides the Chaos Drinks, Roland had many more ideas for special items that could be purchased, which could maintain their own attractiveness and at the same time not to be imitated by any other companies.

Want it? Work hard!

Chapter 947: Return of the Eastern Front Army

After solving the payment problem, Roland planned to break through another wall on the road of development.

This was to formulate standard units.

The universal education in Neverwinter had taken millimeter, centimeter, meter, kilometer, and some other distance units into the textbook, replacing the original distance units such as inch, foot, yard, and so on. So far, it was quite effective. The measuring instruments produced according to the new units, due to their high precision, had been universally acknowledged in construction and industrial production departments.

The benchmark prototype for centimeter, namely an iron bar as wide as Roland's nail, was stored in the study of the castle.

What he wanted to do next was integrate the other units and popularize them in the entire Kingdom of Graycastle.

The reason that he waited for long to do so was that the early levels of production and education did not urgently require new units, and the technique for the units' popularization was not mature enough.

After all, to merely have standards was meaningless. If they could not be produced by measuring instruments, people could not use them in practical life.

For now, none of these things were a problem anymore.

For example, he defined the volume of a vessel of one cubic decimeter as one liter, the weight of one cubic decimeter of water as one kilogram, and a one-meter long pendulum's swing at a period of one second... Hummingbird could precisely replicate the vessels for one kilogram and the pendulum could be used for time. With the prototypes and models, factories in Neverwinter could

produce numerous replicas.

Or Anna would have to take care of all the production of measuring equipment, which was a waste of time and effort.

When the industrial technology reached a certain level, the popularization of more precise measuring units would become inevitable and smooth.

Roland did not worry that those standards might not be "pure" enough. In fact, those prototypes in human history had always been under improvement with the advancement of times.

...

Three days later, Iron Axe, leading the Eastern Front Army, finally returned to Neverwinter. Arriving with him was Echo, who had spent almost half a year in the Port of Clearwater.

Looking at the two Mojins reporting into him in front of his desk, Roland was overwhelmed with emotions. The two of them had been exiled criminals—one of them with a concealed identity and hunted for a living in Border Town; the other was sold as a slave and lived a dangerous life. But now, they had become indispensable members of Neverwinter.

Having shouldered the heavy responsibility of commanding an army all by himself and working busily for months, Iron Axe showed no trace of fatigue, but rather appeared perfectly fine. His gestures and expressions exuded the qualities of a senior general. Echo had changed more dramatically. The influence her slavery life had faded away and her blue-grey eyes radiated confidence. Her temperament matched better with her status as the chief of Osha.

It seems experience can indeed change a person.

Echo's report was quite simple. The Wildflame Clan stuck to the agreement and the first batch of migrants had been stationed at the Port of Clearwater. Affected by the choice of the first clan in

Iron Sand City, a few relatively smaller clans came up to her and expressed their wishes of serving the chief. The entire plan was carried out quite smoothly. After receiving all the people from those clans, the emigrant population in the Port of Clearwater was estimated to reach 30,000 at the end of the year, a number which could compare favorably with that of the old king's city.

She also brought a letter from Spear, the ruler of Fallen Dragon Ridge. Without reading it, Roland was sure it was a request for more labor and food.

"Spear said that as she was only a manager of a small manor, she lacked the experience of taking care of so many people, and she was quite bruised and battered." Echo said, imitating Spear's tone, "Although the skilled hands in the City Hall were good at work, according to their suggestions, there had to be two to three hundred more clerks to help those migrants settle down. If Your Majesty doesn't kindly take more care of her, she said she had the impulse to shrug off her burden and run off to Neverwinter to become a common witch."

Roland could not help, but laugh. "Who said a common witch is idle. Soraya and Leaf will be watching you. How could you be worthy of such a useful ability as magic power channel if you don't exhaust it every day?" Roland thought to himself. "I see. I'll dispatch her more officials from the next batch after they had been approved. You must be tired after this mission. Rest for a few days."

"Yes." Echo bowed and then asked, full of expectation, "Your Majesty, have you been... composing recently?"

"Um...have you learned all the other songs?"

"Yes... they all have good effects, especially when inspiring people," Echo replied with a smile. "When I'm confused, I often sing the songs you taught me. If not for those songs, I might not have lasted till this day."

It seems to coordinate relationships among the clans and maintaining order in the Southern Territory isn't as easy as she reported. It's just she bears the difficulties and setbacks all by herself.

"I see," Roland said slowly. "I'll have someone write down the new songs and send them to your room."

Echo bowed deeply. "Great. Thank you."

No matter how bad he was at composing, he could always rummage through the Dream World. After all, he could never refuse such a request.

After Echo left, Roland looked at Iron Axe.

"It's been a hard task."

"It's okay, Your Majesty," Iron Axe bowed and said hurriedly. "It's an honor to fight for you. I don't find it hard, on the contrary, I enjoy it."

"Really?" Roland smiled, without giving his opinions. "What happened to the nobles who escaped to Seawindshire? You didn't burn them, did you?"

"I wanted to, but they ran too fast," Iron Axe said seriously. "After the First Army finished clearing Valencia and arrived at Seawindshire, the suburb had become a piece of wasteland. Other than that, several granaries in the downtown area caught on fire. Obviously, the nobles would rather ruin the city than hand it over to you in one piece."

"That must have been the last revenge from the rebel king's remnants," Roland thought to himself. "If the Eastern Front Army hadn't had sufficient preparations and the dozens of cement carriers that kept on transporting supplies day and night, this battle would have stopped there because the hungry city dwellers would have robbed from the First Army. As soon as the army suppressed them with violence, restoring order would be out of the

question."

"Where did they escape to?"

"Some went to Fjords, others went to the other three kingdoms," Iron Axe said with regret. "Unfortunately the First Army was not equipped with ships, otherwise there was no way I'd let them go."

"Don't worry. As long as they dare to use their original family names, I'll clear them away sooner or later," Roland said slowly. At least the batch that fled to the Kingdom of Dawn were none better than flies throwing themselves into the net. They probably were Timothy's last loyal followers. Roland did not worry that they might come back. The reason he wanted to remove them once and for all was that they gave him a headache.

After inquiring about the rehabilitative measures in the Eastern Region, Roland suddenly remembered something he had doubted awhile ago.

"Right, and luring the nobles to prison then setting it on fire... did you come up with this idea?"

Iron Axe's expression instantly froze.

Chapter 948: Unexpected Punishment

"Your Majesty, I..."

To Roland's surprise, the latter did not immediately divulge his reply as he would normally do, and seemed somewhat hesitant. It was rare to see the First Army's commander-in-chief behaving like this.

Roland had simply asked the question casually, but he now grew in interest. He had expected Iron Axe to get worked up over this - after all, the punishment for complete responsibility in the matter could include death by burning or hanging. He was, however, curious because the latter had not violated his orders in any reasonable sense, and thus there was surely another explanation for the latter's uncertainty.

However, he did not press on with his charge, and instead leaned back in his chair awaiting the Mojin's reply.

After much contemplation, Iron Axe suddenly knelt down and replied, "No, Your Majesty... though it was Miss Edith who planned the elimination of the enemy's nobles, it was I who carried out the plan, and thus I'm wholly responsible."

"Edith?" Roland was taken aback. "Could this have been planned by the Adviser Department?" Having not seen anything related to this in the submitted proposal, he wondered if this was arranged in secret.

On second thought, he realized why the latter was being hesitant.

In the present era of mercenaries, any military-related affair was considered to be the exclusive concern of the lord, and was extremely sensitive to intervention from outsiders. If the matter took place in another noble's territory, the clandestine agitator would certainly be punished. Iron Axe appeared diffident because he did not want to implicate Edith, yet had no intention to lie.

"From my understanding, you handled the affairs on the Eastern Front very well. The city hall will soon determine your reward amount based on the battle results. You may go for now."

Iron Axe was stunned. "Your Majesty, you won't punish me?"

Roland could not help laughing. "Why? What have you done wrong?"

"Um..."

"My orders were to purge the rebels in the Eastern Region and bring those cities under my rule. You were entitled to act according to circumstances," Roland explained. "If you listened in on two of your soldiers having a strategy discussion in the barracks and decided to adopt their ideas, do I have to punish you and these two soldiers? Edith is a member of the Adviser Department after all, and it's normal for her to have thoughts on strategy."

"So... Your Majesty, you don't think either of us did any wrong in this matter?" Iron Axe lifted his head.

"I didn't say so." Roland shrugged his shoulders. "Just because you're fine doesn't mean that Edith won't have anything to answer for, but that has nothing to do with you. Go back and have a good rest."

Iron Axe opened his mouth as if he was about to say something, but instead he just stared on and decided to obey orders. "Yes, Your Majesty."

After the commander-in-chief of the First Army left, Roland immediately got on the hotline to the city hall. "Inform Edith to come to the castle."

Less than 10 minutes later, the Pearl of the Northern Region arrived at the doorstep of his office.

"Your Majesty, I'm responsible for this matter," Edith spoke without prompt. "I'll accept whatever punishment you impose."

Roland looked at her amusedly. "I haven't opened my mouth and you already know what I'm going to say?"

"When the Eastern Front Army returned to Neverwinter, the first person you would summon was certain to be Iron Axe. If he hadn't reported to you the burning of the nobles, I doubt you would summon me this soon."

"It's always easy to talk to smart people." Roland thought. Her frank manner even made him feel that she was a loyal subordinate who was being wronged.

However, at times, the smarter the person, the more prone they are to getting trapped in a self-created cul-de-sac.

"From the start, it was I who asked him to do this. It simply isn't his style to dupe the nobles together and pass it off as a fire scene. That aside, since you feel that you're responsible, where do you think the problem lies in?"

"I arranged to meet the First Army commander in an unofficial setting without asking for your permission..."

"Wrong." Roland swiftly interrupted her. "Your problem's that you violated the Adviser Department's rules, which state that any battle plan must be recorded on paper and submitted to me for review."

Edith had clearly not expected him to say this, and her eyes widened involuntarily. "Your Majesty?"

"Is that not so?"

"But...", she said with a puzzled look, "this operation was carried out in Your Majesty's name. Won't the other officials see it as something you did?"

"You're not wrong." Roland smiled slightly. "Is there an issue with that?"

"Actually..." Like Iron Axe earlier, Edith displayed a rarely-seen

look of confusion. "They may be rebels, but... they're also nobles. To other nobles, your actions could..."

"I know what you're saying." Roland shrugged. "But if I'm not able to handle the backlash, do you think you can?"

"I..."

"Relax, it's fine. Let me ask you, do you think it's right for me to scapegoat my subordinates when an issue arises?"

"Scapegoat?"

"Ahem, that means to shirk my responsibilities," Roland explained. "This matter was clearly done on behalf of the Kingdom of Graycastle, yet you face death instead of glory. If I feel justified to approve of that, do you think those officials will remain wholly loyal to me?"

Edith kept quiet.

"As the king, I'm the most suitable person to take responsibility. Only this way will the subordinates be able to work without burden. This is also why I have to review the Adviser Department's final plans, in case it's something I'm not well-versed in, understand?"

After quite a while, the Pearl of the Northern Region finally nodded and replied, "I was too self-important."

"For violating the rules, your contributions towards this double offensive shan't be recognized, which would otherwise have got you a promotion." Roland took a sip of his tea. "This matter shall now be closed. You may go now."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Please allow me to take my leave." Edith bowed respectfully.

"So... what you did was all for nothing?" Cole Kant carefully placed a plate of honey-glazed mushrooms in front of Edith and

watched as she viciously stuck her fork into the mushroom slices. "Your colleagues were all able to obtain promotion, but not you?"

"Yes, only me." She munched loudly on the brownish Bird Beak Mushrooms as if to vent her discontent upon the dinner. "Listen to what His Majesty had to say, 'If I'm not able to handle the backlash, do you think you can?' It was so unbearable that I need an outlet right now. Of course, I wouldn't have done what I did if His Majesty was more like my father. But knowing that he wouldn't ignore this, I felt that it wouldn't be a bad investment and that the risks were manageable. Yet, he dismissed everything I did in a few sentences, and even griped that I think too much. Is it really so naive to be an idealist?"

"Uh... Elder Sister, are you angry?" Cole wiped the sweat off his forehead.

"What, you can't tell?" Edith glowered at him.

The latter shrunk his neck hastily. This was the first time he saw his elder sister display such an expression during a non-ceremonial occasion. Having lived together for more than 10 years, Cole was familiar with her great love for power. If, as she put it, she had just lost an opportunity for promotion, it would be normal for her to be annoyed or disappointed. But... her expression informed him otherwise. It seemed more like a... strange smile mixed with anger.

Unless he misunderstood, this sort of grumble was usually called pouting.

"Gosh... ", as he thought about this, Cole could not help letting out a shudder. Who knew that the Pearl of the Northern Region, who's usually a face of indifference or cunning affection, could smile displeasedly? And, unlike during the banquet when it was deliberate, she seemed to be completely unaware of her present expression. Was this really the Edith Kant he knew?

"Uh?" Having not received a reply for some time, Edith sharply squinted her eyes.

Cole suddenly felt the hair on his back raise. "No, there's no doubt she's my sister." "I just think... maybe His Majesty has his own considerations?"

"As he wishes." Edith placed the last mushroom in her mouth. "I just wonder how far an idealist can go. But..."

"What?" Cole faintly sensed a bad premonition.

"But my unhappiness is real." Edith perked her thin lips. "You shall be my punching bag in the meantime."

Chapter 949: The Future of Witches

The new Sleeping Spell was not just a single building, but a residential district of nearly 7000 square meters.

As a key construction zone, it was not only equipped with water and heat supply, but the buildings were four-story frame houses that utilized the fully-tested concrete-pouring technology. The interior plan was exactly the same as that of the Witch Building.

Apart from that, Roland also established in the middle of the neighborhood a two-story conference hall for the Sleeping Island witches to organize activities.

On the first night that migrants arrived in Neverwinter, their welcome banquet was conducted here. And now, half a month later, the hall was once again packed full of witches.

Under the gaze of the audience, Tilly walked on to the podium and announced the recruitment order from Roland Wimbledon, as well as a brand-new salary system.

"... Work arrangements will be like this. 30% of the revenue brought in by witches shall be granted to the Sleeping Spell. This money will be used to improve everyone's lives, expand the scale of the district, and for other necessities," she spoke fervently with a slight smile. "It may seem, on first impression, that I've been undercut by my elder brother. After all, you may know that when we were in Sleeping Island, we collected all of the commission paid by the Fjords' merchants, but in reality, they took the opportunity to put forth several conditions, such as making sure we purchased their grains and products at high prices, and thus the money we obtained at the end of the day was heavily reduced. There aren't as many strings attached over here."

"This amount that Roland is offering will certainly exceed our income in Sleeping Island. Plus, the work will generally require nothing except magic power, and there won't be any excursions to

dangerous places. Hence, our work lives will be much easier. On comparison, it's clear that I didn't get undercut, and I can even be said to be the one taking advantage instead."

Her words induced soft bursts of laughter from the listening crowd.

"But!" Tilly abruptly raised her voice. "There's more reward which I haven't mentioned. In the past, no matter how much money we received from the Fjords' merchants, the money had to be pooled because of how destitute Sleeping Spell was. In the end, the only things handed out to everyone were bread, cotton, and other such common things."

"But now, everyone will receive substantial rewards and not a bunch of intangible numbers. It'll be up to each person to decide how these rewards are used. Please open the envelopes on your tables now."

Molly had long noticed the envelope marked with a Graycastle High Tower stamp but had held off from touching it. She wasted no time tearing it open at the instant Lady Tilly made the request.

"Is this... Gwent, the new card game?" Shadow, who was sat beside Molly, bent her head over curiously.

"Take a look at your own." Molly turned her body sideways to block the latter's sight.

"Gee."

The envelope contained a palm-size paper which could not be any more glossy on appearance, yet that felt uneven on touch. Although it could be bent easily, it did not leave creases like normal paper.

Molly knew she liked the paper from her first sight of it.

It was, quite simply, a work of art.

Although it was much alike the Gwent cards which were popular

within the Witch Union, she could tell the difference between them. It was extremely exquisite in design; the patterns on it were not just gorgeous and colorful, but also highly intricate, as if the lines were drawn using threads of hair. More than simply filling up space, they formed a variety of images and words.

For instance, on the front side of the paper was a High Tower and Spears emblem, while the rear side displayed a high mountain being shone on by the rising sun. Under each image were written the captions "Issued by the Graycastle Royalty" and "For exclusive use by witches", while the four corners of the paper were inscribed with three "10"s and an unknown symbol.

The thing that Molly was fond of was that the images on both sides would reflect golden light when the paper was rotated slightly, as if the patterns were lined with gold.

"Uh... I guess it isn't a Gwent card." Shadow had also discovered the paper's uniqueness. "I remember that the numbers on the cards were all on the same side."

"Is this a gift from His Majesty Roland?"

"But Lady Tilly clearly said that this is a reward."

"Oh... yours is the same as mine?" Orbit came over from the other side of the hall and joined in the conversation.

"Everyone's should be the same."

"What does this symbol mean?"

"Not sure, but I seem to have seen it somewhere..."

A flurry of whispering voices emerged in the conference hall. The witches were all fascinated by these lovely pieces of paper they had just obtained. It was only when Lady Tilly began to speak again that the discussions abated.

"The thing you're holding is called a note. It has the same function as coins, the difference being that this type of note is only

given to witches and can only be used by witches."

"Lady Tilly, you mean that it's a gold royal made of paper?" Someone asked.

"You may understand it that way. But it can be used to buy certain things which are hard to purchase with gold royals." Tilly nodded. "For example, the 10 yuan note that everyone's holding can be used to obtain a full bottle of Chaos Drink or five servings of strawberry ice cream in the Castle District."

Molly began to salivate irresistibly.

She still fondly remembered the few types of delicacy she tasted at the welcome banquet; they were above anything she had ever imagined. In particular, the latter's rich pink color, soft texture, and luscious flavor seemed to bring together the finest descriptions she could conceive of. When compared to it, the salty fish soup of the Fjord Islands could not even be called food.

And now, this beautiful piece of paper could be used to redeem a whopping five portions of the delicacy she could never forget.

Judging from the fervent reaction of the crowd, she was not the only one who was hugely excited about this.

"And, of course, there'll be more than just food to redeem, such as things to wear and use. Any new goods produced in Neverwinter will be first available in the Castle District's shops." Tilly continued aloud. "To put it simply, notes will be your reward for responding to this recruitment drive. The amount that you receive will also be adjusted according to your number of working hours. I should, however, point out that it isn't a living necessity. Even those who choose not to work will be well looked after. It can more accurately be seen as a prize that adds a little extra to life. Thus, whether or not to accept recruitment shall be left to each one of you to decide."

Surprisingly, a boisterous discussion did not ensue. All of the witches continued to place their attention on Lady Tilly, perhaps

knowing that their leader had more to say.

"But, my sisters, this matter isn't only about enjoyment." Tilly slowed her tone. "Remember the unfair treatment we faced after our awakenings? At that time, most of us had the same thought - that it would be good enough for there to be a place where witches may live together with normal people."

After a short pause, she continued in an assertive tone. "So, this concerns the future of all our sisters. There won't be a better opportunity to allow more people to understand us."

Chapter 950: The Art of Persuasion

Molly nodded her head heartfely.

In the past month, she had been deeply touched by the Neverwinter citizens' attitude towards witches. They acted neither overly familiar nor discriminatory, and instead seemed a mix of curiosity and accustomedness.

While strolling around the Harbor District a few days prior, she saw a fierce gust of wind blow down a pile of empty wooden crates on the pier. Her subconscious reaction was to summon her magic servant to catch the falling crates. Instead of screaming and fleeing, the working crowd expressed their great interest in the transparent and legless giant.

This was an experience Molly never had before. Even the migrants on Sleeping Island had never been so close to witches. Although they abided by Her Highness Tilly's command on the surface, they still considered witches to be a different species from themselves. The customary practice of most Fjord islanders was to maintain a respectful distance - only the explorers and some merchants did not mind the powers that the witches possessed.

This was not to mention how terrible the situation was on the continent where the Church had had deep influence.

The first time Lotus brought home news from the Western Region, Molly only half-believed it. Only when she personally came over did she discover that Lotus' stories merely scratched the surface.

Now, she felt a glimmer of envy seeing Lotus leading a large number of people up and down the tall buildings, Evelyn running a perpetually bustling tavern, and Candle, who used to be seen as useless, being warmly welcomed by the factory workers.

It was only because Molly did not want to disturb Her Highness

Tilly that she had not actively sought employment.

She was never one to remain idle, even when in Sleeping Island.

"And, let's not forget that we still have the biggest enemy to take care of - the demons." Tilly looked around the audience. "All of you already know what the Battle of Divine Will means - even the Church of Hermes is nothing compared to them, and therefore, work shouldn't only be for your own enjoyment. Every note represents your contribution to Neverwinter and the entire human world. This brings glory to the witches as a whole because through this, we can prove to the world that witches are an indispensable and decisive part of the human race!" She raised her right hand with her fist clenched. "Sisters who accept recruitment, please walk up on stage now..."

...

"Out of 86 jobs, 69 have received responses. This is a fairly good result." Tilly handed the name list to Wendy after the meeting was over. "And most of the non-repliers are just hesitant. I believe that more will accept recruitment after some time."

"It's more than just fairly good," Wendy quipped excitedly, "This is way beyond His Majesty's expectation."

"Oh?" Tilly seemed curious. "How many did he guess?"

Wendy laughed and extended three fingers.

"30?" Tilly became somewhat peeved. "He belittles the Sleeping Spell way too much."

"Rather than saying that he underestimated the witches' enthusiasm, you can claim credit for it." Wendy dropped her smile and bowed earnestly towards Tilly. "Your Highness, your last statement wasn't necessary."

If it was a normal recruitment talk, 30 people might already have been an optimistic prediction. It was Tilly's rhetoric about working for the sake of all sisters and bringing glory to witches which

moved the majority of the crowd. As the former custodian of the Witch Cooperation Association, Wendy naturally understood what her compatriots most lacked in aside from a stable home: recognition from other people.

After all, having lived as normal people for more than 10 years of their lives, it was not easy for them to cut clean from their past.

"The way I spoke during the meeting was also for my own sake." Tilly smiled and shook her head. "Roland has allowed me to see a wide range of interesting things and understand what an incredible city this is. If we lose the Battle of Divine Will, all of these will disappear, and thus I have to put in effort so that I'll be able to see more wonderful stuff. It's wise to cuddle together for warmth before doomsday winter arrives, right?"

"... Your Highness is right." Wendy began to laugh.

"It's a pity that not everyone agrees with me." Tilly shrugged her shoulders resignedly. "Like the Eastern Region witches, who may never accept recruitment even until the end."

"Your Highness, you mean the small group led by Azima?" Wendy asked puzzledly. "If she doesn't get along with you, why did she go with you to the Fjords?"

"It didn't start out this way." Tilly let out a sigh. "Before they arrived in Sleeping Island, they'd already become acquainted with Bloodfang Association. The latter assisted them many times to fight off the church's chasing army during the escape, and therefore Azima and her people came to trust Heidi Morgan. This was nothing at first, but later on, when tensions broke out between Bloodfang Association and Sleeping Spell, our relationship fractured."

"So that's what happened..."

"And when I fought against Heidi without informing everyone, I incurred even more of Azima's disgust. I thus consented when they

asked to leave Sleeping Island on Sleeping Beauty." Tilly continued slowly. "In fact, if Scroll hadn't dissuaded them, they probably wouldn't have remained in Neverwinter."

"That's not your fault," Wendy said consolingly. "Heidi Morgan deserved it for deceiving the Wolfheart witches."

"But she'd certainly helped Azima." Tilly seemed disinterested in pondering any further over this issue. "If I was in their place, I would probably be peeved as well. They aren't bad people at heart."

"Oh..." Wendy remained silent for a brief moment. "I may have a way of persuading them, but..."

"But what...?"

"It may cause them to break away from Sleeping Spell."

"That'll be no different from how it is now." Tilly replied without any misgivings. "If your idea can benefit Roland and them, go ahead."

"Is this... really okay?" Doris revealed a worried look upon returning to her residential building. "We've already offended Lady Tilly. If we refuse the lord's employment this time and thus further displease her, we might..."

These words received agreement from several other Eastern Region witches.

"I think Doris is right. Roland Wimbledon isn't a typical lord, and is currently the king of Graycastle. Even if we manage to return to the Eastern Region, it's also his territory."

"Plus we aren't combat witches. If they use force against us, we won't have any ability to resist."

"Come on. Even if we fight, how can we beat a lunatic like Ashes? I dare bet that she has long disliked us."

"Actually... I feel that the Witch Union has treated us pretty

well."

"Forget about it. They'll certainly side with the king over this. It would be good enough of them if they don't help His Majesty to arrest us."

"Hold your tongues." Azima cut short the ongoing arguments. "Roland Wimbledon would never use hard methods, or else the image he has built up would be completely undone. If we accept the recruitment order, what would all our earlier persistence be for? We'll be forced to rely on Sleeping Spell in the end. To outsiders, we'll be no different from the other witches."

She said these words with some reservation. In all honesty, the Witch Union had, for the past half a month, provided them with assistance instead of the expected oppression, and treated them as equals. The witch named Wendy even came several times to discuss this matter with her. In fact, Wendy's friendly attitude caused her to feel a long-lost sense of home.

However, Azima knew that she had to continue acting indifferent. She forebode that once she relented, it would become difficult to pull away from the Sleeping Spell ever after.

Right at this moment, someone knocked on the main door of the building.

"Who's it?" She turned her head with some annoyance.

"It's me, Wendy." A familiarly gentle and calm voice was heard from outside. "Miss Azima, I have something to discuss with you."

Chapter 951: Red and White (Part 1)

After closing the door, Wendy swept a glance across everyone and finally stopped at Azima.

"Speak what you have to say." The latter opened in a harsh voice. "If you're here for today's recruitment, you may as well save it. We aren't going to change our minds."

"Azima..." Doris murmured involuntarily.

Azima raised her hand to stop Doris from speaking further. "I'll firmly remember your care for us in the past half a month, but these two matters aren't quite the same. As was said when we first arrived in Neverwinter, now that the Church has been destroyed, I'll have to leave Western Region sooner or later."

"I have some better news for you first." Wendy maintained her gentle expression and replied. "The city hall has received a report stating that a large group of Eastern Region refugees shall arrive in Neverwinter within a week. The numbers shall be as many as 12,000 people. There's a high likelihood that your relatives are among them."

The room seethed with excitement at once.

"Is... what you said true?"

"Certainly. The Sea Transport Department is really stepping it up to fetch them over." Wendy replied smilingly. "The Redwater River is currently teeming with concrete boats headed towards the Eastern Region. These boats are loaded with dry stock and winter supplies, as it's after all already winter."

"I used to live in Archbridge Town. Are there any refugees from there?"

"How's the situation in Valencia?"

"It's certainly a mess."

"Uh... I hope my family isn't among them... it was my father who chased me out in the first place."

"He was bewitched by the Church. Maybe he has now repented."

The commotion in the room went into overdrive.

"Relax, there're 12,000 people." Wendy clapped her hands together. "That should cover most of the cities and towns from Valencia to Seawindshire. It'll be more difficult not to find any of your townsmen. Once Scroll has compiled the census, we'll be able to screen out people with similar backgrounds as yours. And it'll be okay even if we can't find any among this batch as this is only the beginning of a long flow of people to Neverwinter. As long as you remain here, I'm sure you'll get to meet them someday."

She then turned her attention to the witch who appeared anxious. "There's no harm even if you don't want to recognize him. But isn't it better to have some news rather than none at all, Whitepear? If they've repented, at least there's a chance for them to redeem themselves."

"That's... true." The girl by the name of Whitepear lowered her head embarrassedly.

"Are you intent on shifting the entire Eastern Region to Neverwinter?" Azima suddenly questioned.

"Not just the Eastern Region." Wendy laughed. "The Northern and Southern Territories, as well as the Central Region, are also part of the migration plan. These places will eventually be left with only a few large cities, where the residents from the towns and villages will be shifted into."

"Why... is the king going to such trouble for this?"

"This is very difficult to explain. It's called... an urbanization process or something like that. In the past, it was because of food issues that large plots of farmland were necessary to feed a city, and hence the population was very diffuse. But now that food is no

longer a problem, the prevalent concern is that most of the people in the towns and villages are settled in non-administrated zones, where they cannot be effectively organized and utilized. Moving them to the cities will allow the city halls to exercise better control." Wendy patiently explained. "Because of this, the Western Region of today is no longer 'the region of the west' per se. If you decide to leave, what will your sisters do? Do you really want them to also forsake their kin and wander the wastelands of your hometown with you?"

"..." Azima frowned and did not reply for some time.

"Frankly, this is just a show of cowardice." A chilly voice was heard from behind the witches' backs.

The witches' faces changed color as they hurriedly turned to see who it was. A woman shrouded in a black robe had stealthily sat herself on the square table, with her body bent slightly forward, her legs raised, and one hand under her chin. She watched the crowd with amusement, as if she took no heed of their uneasiness.

"Who are you?" Azima asked huskily.

"Nightingale! What are you talking about?" Wendy fretfully yelled. "Relax everyone, she has no malice. She's the Union witch who's responsible for protecting me in secret."

"Did I say anything wrong?" She took off her hood to reveal her beautiful blonde curls. "What do you think these people are hesitant about? It's simply because of their relationship with Bloodfang Association that they're unwilling to serve Her Highness. Yet in reality, they continue to depend on Sleeping Spell, and have no intention of changing."

"What a bunch of nonsense!" Azima clenched her fists angrily. "If it wasn't for Doris, we would have left long ago! Besides, what do you even know about the matter between Bloodfang Association and Sleeping Island!"

"Is that so?" Nightingale raised her brows. "Then why aren't you working?"

"What..."

"Let's do a quick calculation. The cost of transportation and food from Neverwinter to Eastern Region is around 20 silver royals per person. Once there, 10 to 12 bronze royals will be needed per day to purchase food. But don't forget that, because of war and migration, most of the villages have turned into wastelands. So, to live over there, expenses will be a few dozen times higher than in the past. This is also why the refugees are moving to Neverwinter." She explained with great composure. "In other words, it won't be easy to leave Sleeping Spell without a sackful of gold royals. If it were me, I would grab this opportunity to apply for work everywhere so that I can accrue as much money as possible. This is the basis for the group to be able to survive independently. Yet, what have you people done in this half a month? After enjoying the food distributed by Sleeping Spell, you still hope that Her Highness will provide you with your travel expenses?"

"I..." Azima was momentarily stumped. She wanted to refute the accusation but did not know where to begin.

"To me, this is simply cowardice. That's why you sided with the Bloodfang Association under pressure from the Church, and further on, it was because of this sketchy relationship that you felt outraged by the destruction of Heidi Morgan. Yet you have no guts to stand up against an Extraordinary." Nightingale shrugged. "It's indeed true that I'm unclear about the matter between Bloodfang Association and Sleeping Island, but the members of Bloodfang Association, who are in Neverwinter now, certainly know better. Do you really think Heidi regarded you as sisters?"

"Nightingale! Enough!" Wendy hollered.

"When I travel to a foreign land, I'll also seek to draw support from the locals. Your abilities were of great help to them. If they

didn't destroy the ears and eyes of the Church, more and more people would track and encircle them. You just happened to be in the right place at the right time. Let me just ask, if Heidi was really friendly to you, did she inform you about her plotting in Sleeping Island to overthrow Tilly?"

Azima bit her lips tightly.

"If you truly want to prove your resolve, then you should get started with the most basic things. You can find a pack of excuses if you were living on your own deserted island, but over here, Sleeping Spell may be unable to restrain you any further."

Nightingale gave Wendy a blithe smirk before disappearing in front of everyone.

Chapter 952: Red and White (Part 2)

"I'm sorry. She's always this straightforward, but like I said, she has no malice." Wendy hastily apologized. "You don't have to take her words to heart. If you break off from the Sleeping Spell, your situation will be much tougher than now..."

However, none of the witches could speak a word, especially Azima, whose expression seemed exceptionally unpleasant. The heaving of her chest revealed that she was in a highly intense state of mind.

Had it been a regular mockery, she might have been able to laugh it off, or perhaps even protested and argued against it. Unfortunately, Nightingale's words left her completely speechless. Aside from the accusation of cowardice, the other words were like nails that pierced into her heart.

When they were still wandering about the Eastern Region, all of them worked very hard for survival. Holding a copper sheet in one hand, she would tirelessly search, like a dirty little rat, for dropped bronze royals and exchange them for bread and other food products. This would be sufficient for her to live in any city or town had she been on her own. The problem was that she had a large number of companions to take care of.

On days when the yield was insufficient, they would be forced to bear the hunger.

Azima was adamant that she was not a coward, or else she would never have had the courage to leave home and venture into unknown territories on her own. Similarly, it wouldn't have been possible for her to acquaint with so many companions and become their leader.

But Nightingale was absolutely right. Ever since her group met the Bloodfang Association, they began to gradually lose their independent spirit. After all, compared to picking up scraps to

sustain a living, it was much faster for these combat witches to act directly against the rats. If luck was good, they could snag in one day as much money as she did in half a month of toil. And it was only when passing through wild and uninhabited areas that her guidance was needed.

The immense fighting capacity of the Bloodfang Association provided them with a guarantee of safety. She no longer needed to worry whether she had enough bronze royals to purchase the necessary food, or to afford the escort of a caravan. This situation did not change even after they joined the large forces.

After a long time, Azima finally gritted her teeth and spoke. "How tough will it be?"

"I don't know the precise amount of money that Sleeping Spell will distribute for living expenses, but it shouldn't be any lower than that of the Witch Union. That means at least one gold royal per month, which is four to five times that given to a normal person." Wendy replied with an anxious look. "This money can be used for food and accommodation, but there won't be much for luxury."

"Most importantly, even if you leave Sleeping Spell, the Witch Union will temporarily be unable to take you in. The reason is simple. His Majesty doesn't want there to be a rift between the Witch Union and Sleeping Spell, and this sort of thing will easily lead to misunderstandings..."

"Is that it?" Azima snapped indignantly. "20 silver royals per month for each person, that means 120 silver royals in total. Does she really think I can't manage that on my own? That's not funny! I'm not a girl of noble birth. I've rummaged sewers and garbage dumps all for a little bit of food. How can I be fazed by a little hardship like this? This is absolutely nothing. I'll show you, Nightingale! I know you're still here!"

"Miss Azima..." Wendy was about to attempt another round of

persuasion but was held back by Doris.

"I know that you mean well for us, but I also feel that what we've done has been a lil' too much. I feel red-faced after that telling-off from Miss Nightingale." She embarrassedly touched her reddish cheeks and spoke in a soft voice. "Perhaps Heidi Morgan was like what she said and never took us seriously, but we cannot continue on like this. I support Azima's decision this time."

"Me too. If Azima's a coward, then what are we?"

"Me too!"

Everyone nodded their heads in unison.

"I've decided that I want to leave Sleeping Spell. And I won't just make enough for survival. I'll eventually return all that I owe to them!" Azima bellowed at all corners of the room. "I'll make you eat your words, Nightingale!"

Wendy sighed and remained silent for some time before replying, "Since you've decided, I'll explain it to Her Highness Tilly. I'll also try my best to get His Majesty to maintain your special allowance. This way, when you accept the witches' recruitment, you'll also receive an extra portion of money which will make life a lot easier."

Azima turned her curtly. "Do as you like."

...

Wendy let out an uncontrollable sigh as she walked out of the residential area.

"What's the problem?" Nightingale's voice was heard from behind her.

"Nothing, I just feel a little... ashamed suddenly," she muttered. "I'm not what they think. My desired outcome is for them to work for His Majesty Roland."

"But you still did it this way, didn't you? Because you know that

this would be better for everyone. If things remain in the present state, their defiance may affect Her Highness Tilly and thus bring harm upon Sleeping Spell." Nightingale revealed her figure. "I've seen too many people like this. Instead of using reason, it's much more effective to hit them hard until they wake up. There're some even more stubborn people who only repent when death stares them in the face."

Wendy laughed involuntarily. "I guess enlisting your help was indeed the right decision. You completely silenced a person who dared to express her discontent directly to Tilly. Truly the Shadow Killer who awed King's City."

"I simply followed your plan." Nightingale puckered her lips. "All I did was make my tone a little meaner."

"Well, your tone was the key," Wendy exclaimed. "I probably sweated a little on her behalf. I wasn't just acting when I shouted 'Enough!' If I were her, I probably would have come to the same decision."

"Wait... why don't I see this to be a compliment?" Nightingale grumbled.

"Of course it's a compliment. A few Chaos Drinks shall prove that." Wendy laughed and held Nightingale's hand. "Let's exchange 10 dollars for some drinks tonight, shall we?"

"Alright, I believe you."

After reading through Wendy's report, Roland could finally feel assured.

Most of the Sleeping Island witches had accepted recruitment, and the minority groups did not cause too much trouble - everything was shaping up like he had hoped. If the progress in this matter was smooth, there would soon be witches in each and every production industry. Everywhere that people went, they

would be able to see the figures of these young and beautiful women, which could be said to form the unique and unparalleled landscape of Neverwinter.

More importantly, the addition of more than 70 new witches would be a significant boost to the overall industry of Neverwinter. Just thinking about it filled him with hope.

Right at this moment, the telephone on his desk rang.

The signal was from the city hall.

He picked up the phone, and heard Barov's voice on the other end.

"Your Majesty, the Fjords' explorer, Sander Flyingbird's, fleet has arrived in the Shallow Port."

Chapter 953: The Invited Explorer

Two three-masted ships with black and white flags were unloading their cargo when Roland walked into the harbor surrounded by his personal guards. The City Hall officials were circling around the stacked wooden boxes while occasionally making sounds of excitement.

"Long time no see, Your Majesty!" Margaret quickly came forward and bowed with a smile. "Please forgive my appearance... It's not suitable to wear long skirts while sailing at sea, so I hope you don't mind."

The man next to her also bowed. "Your Majesty, Sander Flyingbird of Twin Dragon Island pays his respects to you—are you satisfied with what I'm wearing?" He then winked at him as he asked, "Don't you think this quite matches the words 'High-flying seabirds'?"

In fact, even before he spoke, Roland had already noticed his distinguishing dress. To be honest, it would have been impossible to remain unnoticed when there were so many feathers on one's body. His clothes were those of an ordinary sea merchant from the Fjords, but they were covered with bird-feathered tassels everywhere, from the bandana on his head to the soft leather shoes on his feet. However, after the long sea journey, most of the feathers had become stiff and, though still attached to his clothes, they had now lost most of their luster. Looking at such a scene, one could only be reminded of a bird that had been shot out of the sky.

"No... you've misunderstood," Roland said. As far as he was concerned, "Sander Flyingbird" was just a well-known blue icon, and every male of his age, as well as every female, would experience the same impatience before opening a package with this mark. "Though you want to avoid being recognized by Lightning, I can promise you that if you were to enter the castle looking like this, you would definitely attract her close friend Maggie's

attention, Mr. Thunder. In that case, you wouldn't be able to disguise yourself even if you had a fake beard on your face."

"Hahaha... Is that so?" Thunder laughed with his clear voice. "That's a pity. I was quite proud of this disguise. Did you know that ever since I found a tailor to make this dress, it has become the new trend in many islands?"

"Is this the power of a model?" Roland thought and rolled his eyes silently. On the other hand, it was no wonder he was the most prominent explorer of the Fjords if he could maintain such a young mentality despite being at least forty years old. Nobody else would bother to put in so much effort for just a temporary made up name.

Everything began with that letter before the expedition.

Now that the steel ship was completed, it was time to finally test it. Roland's feelings towards the unpredictable sea were full of awe. He was clearly aware of the actual level of his first steel ship—there was no doubt that even with all the equipment and other gimmicks installed on it, it was still far from sea-worthy.

It required more than a pile of iron pieces which could float and move back and forth to make a qualified sea ship. Due to the violent waves, the ship's mechanisms would have to be completely different from the versions on the inland riverboats. In addition, considering that it was the first time they were using the steam turbine, the reliability of its power system was also still questionable.

However, the most troubling aspect for him was that he was not familiar with the operational procedures of a ship or the human-engine interaction aspects. Whenever he had trouble with the principles of machinery, he could just go to the Dream World to find a solution, but this could not work for the sailing of a ship. Before the development of electronic control systems, each ship would have to be calibrated and handled separately. Hence, there was no other solution left other than to keep researching by

himself.

Thus, inviting Thunder to test it out was the best option he could think of.

Not only he was an experienced navigator but also the leader of an Exploration Group, with hundreds of excellent sailors at his command. His feedback would be invaluable.

Roland was planning to use this chance to both test and adjust the ship while recording all its sailing data. That would undoubtedly be helpful in his preparations to build the next ship. Furthermore, this data would bring Neverwinter lots of wealth.

Since this part of the whole process would take two to three months, Thunder would have to stay in Neverwinter City for a while. In order to conceal his identity, Roland created a fake identity for him in the letter—that of Sander Flyingbird. Surprisingly, not only did he accept it, he even added in a bunch of customizations. His enthusiasm and playful spirit really left the King of Graycastle feeling amazed.

"Oh, Your Majesty, were you really able to finish the construction of the steam-powered boat this fast?" Thunder changed the subject. "At the Fjords, even with the most suitable materials available, the best craftsmen would still need a couple of years."

"That's far too slow. After all, the processing of steel is easier than that of wood as it doesn't need to be soaked in preservatives, and there is no need to wait until it's dry. It only requires ample heat." Roland shrugged his shoulders. "It is currently in the shipyard of the harbor. If you are interested, we can go see it right now."

"I can't wait!" Thunder's eyes instantly lit up. "I just couldn't stop thinking about it on my way here!"

"But what are all those crates of gold royals for?" Roland pointed at the boxes that were being unloaded continuously whilst their number was being counted by the City Hall. "As I said before, you'll

only be charged the cost of production of this boat, nothing more."

"Of course, we wouldn't dare to refuse your generosity," Margaret replied, "These are the profits from the perfumes and the Chaos Drinks."

"That much?" He was a bit surprised. "It's not yet the delivery date stated in the contract, right?"

"Well, since we were on our way here anyway, we could reduce some of the burden from the next delivery like this." Margaret smiled. "But Your Majesty, your guess was correct, those two products have become very popular in the Fjords, especially the Chaos Drinks. The sales volume is incredible. The value of the most delicious ones sometimes rises up to ten times the original value even if they are second-hand. People are willing to collect even the ones that don't taste as good. In short, Chaos Drinks have now become a symbol of strength in the feasts of all the Chambers of Commerce."

Roland couldn't help but raise his eyebrows. It seemed like he made the right choice in letting a professional merchant handle this business.

"Your Majesty, there is a magic reaction within the crowd." Suddenly Nightingale's voice sounded next to his ear. "Is there a witch in their group?"

That's when he realized that not far behind Margaret was a peculiar woman looking towards them. Half of her body was hidden behind a maid and she was showing only half of her face. When their eyes met, she quickly hid her face as if she was a scared rabbit.

Roland vaguely remembered the female merchant mentioning her in their letter. "Is that person your previous witch friend?"

Following his gaze, Margaret nodded softly. "Yes, Your Majesty, she is Joan."

Chapter 954: New Great Wheel

"Oh, she's already able to come ashore..." Roland said with much interest, "I remember you said that after she chose to settle in the sea, she didn't come into contact with humans for a long time."

"It's thanks to Her Highness Tilly and Miss Camilla's help." Margaret sighed. "Without the ability to communicate directly through the consciousness, she probably still wouldn't have been able to adapt to a normal human life. Also, Joan has completely forgotten how to speak. Even though Lord Thunder introduced many scholars to her, the results have not been very positive. Right now, she can't speak more than a few words, and she isn't even able to hold a simple conversation."

At this moment, the female merchant paused as if she didn't know whether or not to continue.

"What's the matter?" Roland asked.

"I don't know whether or not it's because of her long-term transformation, but some of her body parts are no longer the same as those of humans." Margaret bit her lips. "As far as I'm aware, as long as they don't utilize magic power, witches should be no different from humans. But Joan can no longer change to her previous appearance. Her cheeks, neck, arms, and legs are covered by cyan scales, just like those... Sea Ghosts."

Roland immediately thought of Lorgar's long ears and tail. Well... a skin covered with scales was quite the style—ahem, no, now wasn't the time to think about that. Considering that the Sand Nation people even feared the cute ears of Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan, it was only to be expected that the reaction to Joan's situation would probably only be worse.

"Did anyone harm her?"

"We tried our best to prevent it, but it was still inevitable that

someone would spread the news." Margaret sighed.

"If we want to teach her how to adapt to human life again, then it is inevitable that she will come into contact with other people," Thunder said helplessly, "Her appearance is not well received even at the Fjords—since taking her in, three maids and two scholars have already been scared away from her. There are even rumors that I am raising a Sea Ghost. Maybe the sea is most suitable for her after all."

"If my friend truly disliked life on land, I wouldn't force her to stay on the island against her will." The female merchant continued. "But Joan didn't really mind the process of coming into contact with other people. Even though she has to stay for many hours in the sea each week, she still likes to hang out with those maids that accept her. Furthermore, compared to the raw fish meat she used to eat previously, she now prefers it well-cooked."

Still, this kind of environment was only limited to Thunder's premises—Roland understood what she meant, but he couldn't think of a good solution. Changing one's point of view required lots of time, not to mention, her situation was much more serious than that of the other witches. Throughout history, animalization, deformation, or in general inhuman appearances would always be faced with discrimination and social exclusion.

"It will get better eventually," he reassured her. "May I take a closer look at her?"

If the problem was indeed that serious, the only thing to do for now was to conceal her appearance—just like Lorgar's ears, who would look like a normal person as long as she wore a hat.

"Of course." Margaret waved at Joan and said, "Come here, dear."

But the latter only took a quick look at them and then hid again.

"Uhm... Your Majesty, I'm sorry but she probably isn't used to such a big crowd." Margaret bowed apologetically.

"It seems like you scared her." Nightingale gloated next to his ear.

Roland glared at the space next to him, coughed twice and said, "It doesn't matter. She has to stay in Neverwinter for a while anyway. She will get used to it eventually. Let's head over to the shipyard for now."

...

In order to build the steel ship, Roland specifically cleared an empty space of nearly a hundred acres south-west of Shallow Beach and asked Lotus to build a wall around it, forming a barrier which prevented anyone from peeking in from the outside. Apart from setting up sentry towers at its four corners, he also arranged the First Army to guard it. Therefore, apart from the onsite workers, not many people knew how this massive ship, which required the agglomeration of all the top industrial production lines within Neverwinter City to be built, looked like in the end.

As they entered through the wall and arrived at the bottom of the zigzagging staircase, an exclamation of uncontrollable amazement erupted within the group.

Everyone's attention was drawn by the huge structure displayed in front of them.

That was definitely not an exaggeration.

When admiring the ship from below, the first thing one would see was the towering ship hull—different from the round hulls of the three-masted sailing ships, the side of its hull was perpendicular to the ground while the base was so flat that there was no sign of any extruded keel. Since their view was limited, everyone felt as if they were standing under a towering steel wall, and one could only succumb the feeling of pressure that it gave off.

"In the name of the Three Gods... am I dreaming?"

"How heavy it is? Must be more than 20 thousand tonnes."

"Even the biggest sailing ship wouldn't be able to withstand an

impact from it!"

"Don't even mention sailing ships. I'd bet that even deep-sea monsters would flee in its presence!"

"Thunder... no, Lord Flyingbird, you didn't tell us that we were going to sail on such a monster!"

The order within the group was instantly scrambled as the sailors ran towards the ship. They started touching and knocking its hull, unable to contain their enthusiasm.

All of them were the most experienced sailors of the Fjords, and even though they had never seen something like this before, they still understood its uniqueness.

As for Thunder, his shock on his face was no lesser than the rest. In fact, it was even more.

When Roland had mentioned in his letter that the ship was made entirely of steel from top to bottom, he had assumed that he was exaggerating—after all, even in normal wooden ships, the best wood and materials would only be used in the key parts of the ship. Therefore, when recruiting his men, he had only described the ship as an ocean-going vessel without sails, which contained a steel skeleton strong enough to withstand the huge waves of the Sealine.

But what his eyes saw now proved that was not the case.

Even though he knew that Neverwinter was very adept at ship construction, yet he had never imagined it would be to such a level. The amount of materials alone were so terrifying that it would be impossible to gather all them in the Fjord Islands, not to mention the technique that was used to join the hard steel together.

How valuable is steel?

Among the various commodities, iron ore was not considered luxurious as a palm-sized crude iron ingot could be sold for about

30-40 silver royals. But if it was forged into steel, then its price would multiply by over tenfold. It would be so valuable that knights would usually treat their steel armor as family heirlooms and pass them on from generation to generation.

The reason for the high price of steel was how time-consuming its processing was. In an entire lifetime, a blacksmith could only make about seven or eight sets of qualified steel armors. In other words, even if all the blacksmiths of the Fjords were gathered, they would not be able to make so much steel even over a dozen years.

What he first ordered from Roland was just a steam paddle steamer, which, according to the Fjords' Chamber of Commerce, cost around three to four thousand gold royals. So when the other side said they would only charge the production fee, he did not really consider it as a large favor. That was because the worth of a new Sealine was far more than the cost of the ship itself. Since the King of Graycastle only wanted to exchange intelligence, this trade could not be considered as him taking advantage of the other side.

He had even planned to pay Roland the full cost of the ship after the exploration of the Sealine, as a reward for him taking care of his daughter and because he wished for Lightning to have a better life in Neverwinter in the future.

But now Thunder finally realized that, even by considering only the cost of the materials alone, the price of this ship would still be an astronomical figure.

He could not help but feel sorry for his purse.

Chapter 955: An Unexpected Reunion

When Thunder brought up his question, Roland could not help curling his lips into a smile.

He had to admit that the explorer was very good at grasping the nature of problems. By the standards of this era where everything was handcrafted, the price of any massive industrial product would be an astronomic number. However, Roland would definitely not charge Thunder based on the actual overhead cost of shipbuilding. It would just sound too businesslike and would definitely not help foster a healthy and sustainable relationship between them.

As a matter of fact, the immediate launch of the two concurrent projects, the steel ship and the railway train, was largely attributed to the newly built steelmaking facilities after the success of the converter experiment in Neverwinter. The steel mill, which had now become completely independent of the witches, had created a virtuous cycle for efficient production. The whole steelmaking process, which included ironmaking in the Blast Furnace Zone, charcoal production in the coker unit, obtaining liquid steel, and forming ingots had become mechanized.

Other than a few workers, there were only auxiliary machinery powered by steam engines in the entire plant. The steamy water vapor mingled with the ashes formed a unique phenomenon at North Slope Mountain known as grey fog. People would notice the mountainside was overcast by a layer of "smoky clouds" when they looked up at the Impassable Mountain Range from somewhere high in the city.

As the steel mill was currently in full swing, the average daily output these days exceeded the annual output of a city in the past. The astonishing production rate thus lay a solid foundation for all the industrial projects in Neverwinter. With the introduction of automatization, everything would experience a drastic change,

although few people understood what it actually represented.

"We can talk about money later, but I assure you that it would be much cheaper than you think." Roland smiled faintly. "Because money isn't an issue, I've said that the exploitation of unknown seas means a great deal to the entire human race. As the King of Graycastle, I would love to be part of that project."

Thunder's expression changed. He said, "I'm very impressed with your foresight... Few people are willing to spend money on something intangible. Even the Chamber of Commerce at the Fjords is more inclined toward investigating new routes that would bring potential benefits. Although you can't participate in the exploration yourself, you have a much larger ambition than many explorers."

"So, you were just speaking civilities back in the old king's city?" Roland thought indifferently. He believed nobody had a stronger desire than him to explore the world, for it concerned the origin of the Battle of Divine Will and the big secret behind it.

"Anyway, let's board the ship first." Roland smiled and changed the subject. "Since you're here, I'll show you around."

"That would be great, Your Majesty!" Thunder grinned.

...

Since Roland had no reference or precedent, the steel ship was a "nondescript" as it adopted different features of various classic ship models. Its front end resembled an ironclad, the bow of which slightly leaned outward, with an embolon underneath the waterline. The middle part of the ship was broadened to help the vessel maintain stability in severe sea conditions. The rear was flat like a modern ship. The total weight of the vessel was about 2,500 tons.

Roland had once attempted to incorporate some new and unusual technologies, such as a bulbous bow and a fin stabilizer, into its

design to optimize its performance. However, a bulbous bow should be crafted separately based on the design and the speed of the ship, whereas a fin stabilizer required complex mechanical linkage to adjust its angle. In consideration of the time limit and the practicality of the project, he had abandoned these pursuits that apparently exceeded the abilities of the current technologies.

Nevertheless, it did not mean that this was an enlarged version of "the Roland", the shallow water gunboats. The steam turbine assembled by Anna alone was beyond the scope of Thunder and his party's understanding. Apart from that, it was the first time that a wind-up telephone was used for communication. Several telephone lines connected the command room, the machinery room, and the watchtower together. Compared to an on-and-off acoustic tube, the telephone worked much better. The captain could hear reports from various parts of the ship clearly with the telephone despite the loud noises of the sea.

It was also worth mentioning that the wind-up telephone was equipped with a bewitched Mini Dawn battery that could last long enough to complete a prolonged trip.

"This is... incredible." After the tour, Thunder exclaimed in the bright, spacious tower bridge. "It doesn't look like a ship to me but a moving castle above water."

Roland was amused at how fast Thunder had changed his thoughts of the ship. He said, "How about it? I didn't let you down, did I?"

"No, Your Majesty. I'm flattered." The explorer did not conceal his contentment at all. "She's the most beautiful ship I've ever laid my eyes upon. It exceeds my expectation from every aspect. I feel I can rule the whole Swirling Sea with her."

"Don't rush to a conclusion yet." Roland waved his hand. "To be completely honest, I know nothing about shipbuilding. Therefore, it's just a very complicated machine at the moment and not a real

ship yet. It all depends on how she performs in the upcoming test. You have to provide me with a series of statistics, including her speed, stability, your crew number, the quantity of your food, etc. If things go well, you'll be able to set out for Shadow Sea after the Months of Demons this year."

"Know... nothing?" Thunder clucked his tongue. "If the old craftsmen at Fjords hear you say this, they would plunge into the sea out of mortification. By the way, if you can build such an amazing steel ship while knowing nothing about shipbuilding, what would you build if you did know something?"

"You'll get the answer to that question tomorrow." Roland left Thunder in suspense. "Enjoy the feast tonight first."

The castle hall was alive with flickering lights as night descended.

Stones of Light that emanated a soft and steady glow replaced candles. The old long wooden table was replaced with a round one covered with white cloth. Wine glasses were replaced with a champagne tower. The band started to play violins. Ever since the treasure of the city hall had been filled with golds, the whole city had been freshened up and taken on an entirely new look. Even banquets had started to adopt the extravagant style of those in the old king's city. Most guests were prominent figures in Neverwinter and other cities of the alliance. The Witch Union was, of course, invited like they were every time.

"The man next to His Majesty is an explorer from your native town?" Lorgar cast a glance at the man with some interest and then turned to Lightning. "Aren't you going to talk to him?"

"His name is Sander Flyingbird, right?" The little girl shrugged and fed the pigeon hovering above her a slice of grilled mushroom. "I've never heard of him, so he must be a nobody. I have nothing to say to him. You don't know that there are numberless explorers at

Fjords, most of whom are captains who only had a couple of long voyages. They didn't even experience hurricanes or huge waves." Lightning paused for a second and then asked, "By the way, why do I not see Mystery Moon yet? Didn't she say that she wanted to have a competition with us, the Exploration Group?"

"But a person that the chief receives shouldn't be a man of normality," "Like me..." Lorgar thought to herself while wagging her tail, "Perhaps he's got some information about your father."

After Lorgar joined the Neverwinter Exploration Group, she learned more about the other two members' backgrounds.

"I agree, coo!" Maggie chimed in. "It doesn't hurt to ask, coo!"

Lightning twitched her lips indifferently. "Since you insist, I'll go and say hello to him."

Chapter 956: Thunder and Lightning

Although Lightning promised to go talk to the explorer, she did not have high hopes.

Roland also knew that she was seeking Thunder. If he had heard anything, he would have told her. Since he had not, it was most likely that the explorer knew nothing about it.

But anyway, she would do what Maggie and Lorgar had suggested so she could put their minds at ease.

Lightning walked up to the explorer but frowned immediately when she got a close look at the person. She was shocked by his florid fashion style.

The explorer from the Fjords named Sander Flyingbird appeared to be around 30. His right eye was masked. The eye mask was embroidered with a fresh rose. More than half of his face, however, was covered by the tattoo of rose twigs and leaves. Apparently, he had a horrible fashion taste.

Although an outstanding explorer should not judge a book by its cover, she was not impressed with his act of demeanor either.

It appeared that Sander Flyingbird was boasting about one of his thrilling adventures to other guests. It turned out he was just talking about Searing Flame Islands, but the words and expressions he used to describe his experience made people believe that he had reached the end of the ocean or the edge of Hell. It was true that Searing Flame Island was a perilous place, where lava constantly ejected from the bottom of the ocean and formed huge columns of steam that tended to block the view and burn crew members... Nevertheless, after generations of exploration, a full map of that area had been drafted. Adventurers simply needed to follow the correct route and enter the Island at a right time in order to avoid the dangers.

She had visited the main island of Searing Flame Islands, Flaming Mountain, with her father when she had not even reached the age of ten.

For the people of the Fjords, they only considered those who discovered new sailing routes, islands or relics as explorers. Since there were thousands of islands scattered around the Swirling Sea, a lot of people called themselves explorers, there were huge differences among them in terms of skills, experience, and abilities.

There were very few people who, in Lightning's opinion, could sit equal with her father, and Sander Flyingbird was obviously not one of them.

She instantly lost interest in him. While Lightning was hesitating, someone suddenly held her hand.

She looked up and found it was Aunt Margaret.

"Good timing, little girl." The female merchant beamed at Lightning. "Let me present Mr. Sander to you. He's an explorer from Twin Dragon Island and also the chairman of Dragonhead's Chamber of Commerce. He's also one of your father's admirers."

"I've already known his title." Lightning grumbled under her breath. However, since Aunt Margaret had already started the conversation, she had no choice but to manage a smile and say, "Hello, my name is Lightning. I am also from the Fjords, although I wasn't born on the Fjord Islands."

"Ah, so you're Sir Thunder's daughter?" Sander replied gleefully, "Ms. Margaret told me that the daughter of the greatest explorer is currently in Graycastle. We have finally met. Hmm... you do sort of look like Sir Thunder!"

"He's lying. Dad has never said I look like him. I look more like my mother whom I've never met." Lightning twitched her lips. "Thank you. Do you have any news about him?"

"I've only heard rumors. Some say he's ended up on an unknown island while others maintain that he's actually returned to Fjords. Because he encountered something unusual after the shipwreck, he keeps a low profile and is now recruiting new crew members for his next undertaking. I don't give a damn about other theories... especially those groundless rumors that harbor ill designs." Sander rambled on. "Of course, I'm personally inclined to the second theory. There're quite a few reefs around where the storm took place. Sir Thunder could definitely get himself out of trouble. In fact, many of his crew members survived the catastrophe."

This speculation was quite close to her own. Lightning felt the man was less distasteful.

She didn't really care if her father was looking for her or not.

As long as she stuck to her path as an explorer, she believed that they would meet again at some point in the future.

"By the way, can I ask which island you discovered?"

"Um..." There was a tinge of embarrassment in Sander's voice. "Well, I can't lie to His Majesty, but I became an explorer largely because of your father. The discovery of Shadow Islands has tempted many people, including the Chamber of Commerce, to further explore the area. We planned to deliver some supplies to a transfer island. Unfortunately, my fleet deviated from the original route due to an unexpected attack from a Sea Monster halfway, which later led us to the discovery of an island not yet marked on the map."

As Lightning had expected, Sander Flyingbird was that type of really lucky explorer who had just had a few expeditions.

"I see, but this is also the beauty of exploration, isn't it?" Lightning put on a serious look. "I'll let you and His Majesty talk." She then turned to Roland and performed a curtsy. "Your Majesty, please excuse me."

Roland seemed to be a little absent-minded because it took him a while to reply. "Ah... off you go," he said blankly.

Although she noticed that His Majesty looked a bit weird, Lightning did not take it seriously as she thought Roland was subject to Nightingale's protection. Instead of worrying about Roland, she should get prepared for the upcoming competition. It was literally the first contest after the foundation of the Exploration Group, so she must not allow a defeat!

...

Watching the little girl scuttle away, Roland was dumbstruck.

Thunder is a born actor!

His acting was so seamless that even his own daughter was not suspicious!

"No, that isn't technically right." If he had not known that the person in front of him was Thunder, he would have never associated with the "Sander Flyingbird" currently standing right next to him with the person who had gotten off the ship.

The primary reason to hold this particular feast was to give an appropriate explanation for Thunder's presence. Therefore, Roland had intended to arrange two separate reception halls, one big and the other small, where the small one would be used for receiving guests of honor. It was also a common practice among nobles. However, Thunder thought it was unnecessary for such formalities and insisted that one hall would do.

Roland had no issue with it either way. After all, Thunder was the person who did not want to meet his daughter. Yet to Roland's great dismay, Thunder had completely turned into a different person when he had shown up at the party with his fur coat off. Thunder told Roland that the change of his appearance was actually the joint effort of a gel substance and pearl powder. The dramatic tattoo and eye mask were also for the purpose of

diverting people's attention to prevent them noticing the difference between the gel substance and his naked skin.

As for the change in his voice, it was a skill Thunder had developed over years of exploration.

But Roland did not buy his explanation.

He believed that everyone had his own distinctive character. Even if he could change his voice and appearance, it was still not that easy to escape the scrutiny of his own daughter who had lived with him for over 10 years.

Nonetheless, Thunder's acting made Roland believe that there were people who possessed this extraordinary talent. In an instant, the original 40-year-old explorer had been replaced by a dandy, boastful young leader of Dragonhead Chamber of Commerce.

Roland only knew one other person who had the same level of acting skills and that was May.

Chapter 957: A Challenge from Mystery Moon

"Thank you." When there were just Margaret and Nightingale around, Thunder dropped his fake smile and said to Roland sincerely, "I'm very happy about her current status. Now I know that I made the right decision back then. I'll leave her in your care."

"She's grown up..." Margaret remarked impressively. "The way she mimicked the tone of adults made you just want to press the poor little thing to your bosom."

"Hey, that's what you're really thinking, isn't it," Roland said within himself. Then he said, "But Lightning hasn't given up on her undertaking. Although she lives here, she formed her own exploration group, despite that there are only three members. She would eventually catch up unless you lock her up now."

"If that's unavoidable, then it's her destiny." Thunder forced a smile. "But not now at least. I hope she can live a happy and safe life before that day comes."

Having said that, the Battle of Divine Will was right around the corner. Even Lightning stayed away from the ocean, she was not safe there. Once Neverwinter, which was at the very front of the battle, fell, the entire human race would be doomed. Roland did not tell Lightning about this greatest crisis that human beings would ever encounter, for he knew the war itself was the most magnificent adventure Lightning would ever run into. She would definitely not miss the opportunity to personally participate in it. Since he could not persuade her to withdraw from the upcoming battle, he did not want to burden her with such an unnecessary premonition of imminent disaster.

"Rest assured, I'll take good care of her." At length, Roland patted Thunder on his shoulder and said slowly.

...

"What did he say?" Lorgar put Maggie, who was perched in her arms, back onto Lightning's head and asked, "Did you hear anything about your father?"

The little girl shook her head and replied, "As I expected, there's nothing about his whereabouts. But don't worry, I prefer to find him myself with my team. That would be more interesting!"

"I agree, coo!" Maggie flapped her wings.

"By the way, is Mystery Moon here yet?"

"Nope."

"What the heck." Lightning twitched her lips. "Is she just going to bail on us? She promised us with such confidence before."

"By the way... what's the challenge she issued to us?" Lorgar was curious.

"I have no idea, coo!"

"Huh?"

"We, the Exploration Group, are ready to accept any challenge, no matter what they are," Lightning said triumphantly.

"That's right, coo!" Maggie chimed in while craning her neck.

"Ugh..." The Princess of the Wildflame Clan clapped her hand over her forehead, totally speechless. She started to wonder what a chaotic group she had joined.

"Sorry, I'm late..." Just then, they heard Mystery Moon's voice coming from behind them. Lorgar turned around and saw Mystery Moon and Lily trotting toward them, followed by Summer and Sharon.

"I thought you weren't coming." Lightning folded her arms.

"Why wouldn't I?" Mystery Moon cried. "I was just tied up with some investigation work. This is also a necessary step for the

contest to run smoothly."

"Alright then." Lightning shrugged indifferently. "Now can you tell us what the contest is?"

"Of course I will. However, before that, I'd like to introduce my team first." Mystery Moon opened her arms and pushed the other three girls forward. "I announce that this is the date for the official establishment of Neverwinter Detective Group. These are the new members I just recruited!"

"Huh?"

"Detective... Group?"

"What's that, coo?"

"No, I'm not a member!"

The witches reacted differently to the remark. Lorgar and Maggie both stood stupefied, having no clue as to what was exactly going on, whereas Summer and Sharon were clearly confused. Lily, on the other hand, yelled in annoyance.

"It was His Majesty! His Majesty!" Mystery Moon explained hastily. "Wendy told me that His Majesty knows that we went to the academy to investigate the arson. He then taught me this word, which means uncovering the unknown and searching for truth. In addition, he gave me a special title as well."

"Really?" Lightning looked incredulous.

"You can ask Wendy. I remember it's called front-load... front-load washing machine." Mystery Moon scratched the back of her head. "But Wendy doesn't know the exact meaning either."

"Searching for the truth of a crime..." Sharon muttered ponderously. "If it helps with the security of Neverwinter, I'd like to be a part of it."

"Would there be any problems if I join?" Summer pointed to herself. "Miss Nightingale said I'm already a member of Security

Bureau."

"It would be fine." Mystery Moon gave a thumbs-up. "Lightning also needs to scout for the First Army from time to time, doesn't she? As long as we put priority on His Majesty's orders, there shouldn't be a problem."

"Sorry, but please don't count me in." Lily rolled her eyes. "There are tons of samples I need to record in the laboratory, and the size of the mushroom plant has to be doubled again. I really don't have time for your game. Call me a traitor if you like, but it won't change anything!"

"Traitor!"

"You..."

"Wait, my bad. Let me finish." Mystery Moon nagged. "I'm serious this time. You should all know that His Majesty received some guests from Fjords, right?"

"That's quite obvious." Lily snapped impatiently. "What do you think this feast is about?"

"But my point is that there's a witch among them." Mystery Moon continued, "I was inspecting the illumination at the port when they arrived..."

"You were just idling about, weren't you? Nobody would turn on lights during the daytime."

"Ahem, and then I noticed her." Mystery Moon ignored the blatant flaw that Lily had just pointed out in her story and said, "I've heard that the Fjord people will be staying at Neverwinter for quite a few months, and this includes the witch. So, she'll be the very subject of our contest."

"Oh, really?" Lightning was intrigued, "Tell me about it."

"The first team that successfully persuades her to join their group wins the game!" Mystery Moon proclaimed. "The Detective Group

is considered the biggest organization under the Witch Union because we have four members. However, since the Exploration Group was founded earlier, I would say we're tied for now. The winner of this competition will thus decide which team is the stronger of the two!"

"Haha." Lorgar almost bit her tongue. She could barely suppress her laughter. "To team up with a stranger witch?" Although she knew the contest did not have to be as formal as a holy duel, she was both amused and astonished at the playful manner in which they set up the competition.

To Lorgar's surprise, however, both Lightning and Maggie looked grave, particularly Maggie. She was apparently in a state of alert, as her tail was high up in the air.

Princess Lorgar cried in silence. She wondered if she could still withdraw from the competition.

"Although I don't think you can judge a team by the number of its members, I accept the challenge!" Lightning patted her chest.

"Coo, coo!"

"Don't ever take it lightly." Mystery stuck out one finger. "First, the witch named Joan can barely talk, so it's hard for her to communicate with others. Second, she's so frightened that the poor thing senses danger from any invitations from strangers, just like us back then when we were wanted by the church. So, it's going to be a time-consuming project. As for the rules of the game, whichever team that first wins her over wins the game. How does that sound?"

"I have no issue with it." Lightning nodded.

"Hang on... I have a question." Lorgar made the last attempt to get herself out of the contest. "If what you said is true, she would only be here for a few months. In that case, there's no point to argue which group she would join eventually. Whether it's the

Detective Group or the Exploration Group, it'll make no difference to her."

"That isn't true." Mystery Moon refuted gravely. "If we can help her walk out of the shadows and open up to us, everything would be worthwhile. Perhaps, it means nothing to an ordinary person, but to her, it will be the sunshine that lightens up her life, and this was also what His Majesty did for us in the first place."

In an instant, Lorgar's heart missed a beat. It suddenly occurred to her that these girls were probably not as juvenile as she had thought them to be.

"Hold on, who told you all this?" Lily drew her brows together.

"Well..." Mystery Moon was at a loss for words.

"Did you—" She cast a suspicious glance at Mystery Moon and then at Summer before she uttered an exclamation of surprise. "Did you ask Summer to use her ability to eavesdrop on His Majesty?"

"No, no!" Mystery Moon explained quickly. "We simply went back to the time when they visited the dock. It was nothing confidential, as His Majesty made a speech in front of everybody!" With these words, she stole an embarrassed glance at Lightning. "I swear in the name of electromagnetic power!"

"You were way over the line this time. I'm going to report to Wendy!"

"Trai — no, I swear I'll never do it again!"

"I don't trust you!"

"I'm serious!"

"You always lie to me!"

"If I lie to you again, I won't have any more Chaos Drinks. Hey, don't go!"

While the Detective Group was experiencing an internal conflict,

Maggie leaped into flight abruptly and flew to the other side of the hall.

Only Lightning and Lorgar saw her leave.

Lorgar saw the pigeon flit across the hall and descend on a round table. It picked up a piece of barbeque meat with its beak and landed on Joan's shoulder.

The girl seemed to be startled at first, but she was soon attracted to the bird. Afterward, she even took the barbeque meat the bird offered her.

The wolf girl turned to Maggie and lifted up her ears.

Shortly afterward, she captured the conversation between them.

However, she could barely understand it.

"Coo."

"Ya."

"Coo, coo—coo!"

"Ya Ya."

"..."

Around seven or eight minutes later, Maggie rose in the air and landed on Lightning's head again.

"She agreed to join the Exploration Group, coo!" Maggie announced triumphantly.

Chapter 958: A Heartbreaking Friendship

"What happened there?" As Roland and Margaret were talking, Margaret uttered an exclamation of surprise. "What's Joan... doing?"

Roland also noticed the commotion on the other side of the hall. He saw Margaret's witch friend leave her spot and, escorted by her maid, slowly walk toward Lightning and the other witches.

Maggie, on the other hand, was flying back and forth, seemingly delivering messages for her.

At first, Joan was so nervous that she clung to her maid the whole time. She only poked her head out when Maggie was around. However, when she and Maggie gradually got to know each other, the situation soon changed.

She not only started to talk to the witches but even reached out her hands to touch Lorgar's ears and tail in a gentle manner.

"Now I see." Roland could not help smiling. "Lightning is indeed quick at making friends."

"That's... unbelievable." Margaret clapped her hand over her mouth. "You know how long it took me to persuade Joan to come ashore? It took me a good two months, and I had to ask Ms. Camilla to help me."

"How did she do that?" Thunder was also surprised.

"She doesn't have to do anything, but just take Maggie and Lorgar with her," Roland explained with a smile. "What Joan truly fears is the abhorrence with which people treat foreign races or people of different appearances. Perhaps, Joan views both the pigeon and the wolf girl as people of her kind."

"Her... kind?" Margaret echoed.

"Yes. You've met Maggie before, but Lorgar bears more

similarities to Joan than Maggie." Roland then told Margaret about some of the animal features of Princess Lorgar of the Wildflame clan. "Anyway, you don't need to worry whether she would be able to blend in."

"Has the witch called Lorgar... never been rejected by anyone?"

"If she wasn't, she wouldn't have come to Neverwinter. Even in the Southernmost Region where witches are generally treated as Divine Ladies by every clan, one with a mishappened figure would still be regarded with evil forebodings." Roland shook his head. "Of course, not everyone in Neverwinter accepts them, but the discrimination would be a lot more subtle than in other places. As for the Witch Union, nobody would ever discriminate another because of her look. Everyone has gone through the same pain and fully knows the nature of their abilities. They would be more than happy to have a new member."

"People fear the unknown." Thunder sighed. "What first motivated me to become an explorer was purely money, but now I want to cover as much untrodden land as possible before I die. There are so many mysteries in this world that await us. If people are just satisfied with the place where they were brought up, they would probably be bound by fear for the rest of their life."

"This is also the reason I support you." Roland raised his glass. "There's an old saying: a person will eventually become as great as his thought. You'll go down in history if you can think that way."

"Thank you," Thunder replied with a smile and clunk his glass. "I'll try my best to not disappoint your expectations. You can count on me."

Margaret gazed at Joan for a long time, as if she were lost in thought. After quite a while, she turned around and bowed to Roland, with her hand on her chest. "Your Majesty, I have a bold request."

"Say it."

"I planned to take Joan back to the Fjords and persuade her to settle down where she was born after this exploration is over," Margaret said in a soft voice. "The life on the sea is too lonely and I don't want to see her continue this way. But now I changed my mind..." Margaret paused for a second and then asked, "Your Majesty, can I entrust her to you?"

"You want her... to stay in Neverwinter?"

"If Joan stays at the Fjords, she would probably ground herself and speak to very few people. But she can make some true friends here." Margaret nodded. "She left the ocean, which she is so used to, and followed me here. I don't want to fail her trust. I truly feel nowhere is more suitable for her than Neverwinter."

"That's not a problem." Roland smiled faintly. "This is exactly what the Witch Union was founded for."

"Now that I have your promise. I'll fully trust you on the matter." Margaret dipped in a curtsy, relieved.

Lily returned to her bedroom, yawning, and hung her wet towel on the rail. When she was about to read the biology book before going to bed, she heard Mystery Moon mutter behind her.

"We lost... we lost... we lost..."

Lily rolled her eyes, pretending she did not hear the repetitive mumble, and opened the book indifferently.

The murmur, as she had expected, grew louder immediately.

"The Detective Group lost... the Detective Group lost... the Detective Group lost..."

"Are you done or not?" Lily felt her temples throbbing. She sat upright and yelled, "Can't you just go to sleep?"

"But we lost." Mystery Moon buried her face in the pillow and grumbled resentfully. "Aren't you sad at all? I already had a plan

on how to make her side with us. I was so close! Look at the way they communicate. It doesn't seem that they understand each other. How did they do that? Did they know each other from before? Now the Exploration Group is equal to the Detective Group in number, and we're no longer the biggest organization..."

Lily had no comment. Mystery Moon was not, evidently, very close to winning because the Exploration Group had literally defeated them before they had even started. "Why do I have to feel sad about it? I have nothing to do with you." Lily interrupted her never-ending whining. "I reiterate. There were just three people in the Detective Group at the beginning and now you have lost the game and are outnumbered. You are flattened. You'd better dissolve the group before it isn't too late."

With these words, she returned to her book and was determined not to talk to her roommate anymore, no matter how hard she tried to get her into a conversation.

To her surprise, however, Mystery Moon stopped bothering her. For a moment, the room was unusually quiet.

This isn't right.

Lily was a little worried and wondered if she had been too harsh on Mystery Moon. Although Mystery Moon could be a bit annoying sometimes, she meant well. If there had not been such a ridiculous competition, Joan would probably have never opened up to them so quickly. Although Mystery Moon should not have eavesdropped on His Majesty, it was, essentially, not a mistake with serious consequences... Maybe she had been a little too serious over the matter.

Suddenly, an idea formed in her mind.

Unlike her, Mystery Moon used to be very reserved and timid. Due to her ability, she had constantly been scolded by Cara back in the Witch Cooperation Association and everybody had treated her as an invisible person. Thanks to the Witch Union, she had finally

become more outgoing and sociable. Lily wondered whether her reproach would make Mystery Moon slip back to her old ways and sink into a state of dejection again.

At this thought, Lily regretted yelling at her so severely.

She swallowed hard and slowly turned around, about to apologize.

But she was met with a ten dollar note in her face.

Mystery Moon was standing behind the bed, arms out. She thrust the note right under Lily's nose.

"Wh-what're you doing?" Lily was frightened.

"I beg you not to leave the Detective Group. I'm willing to offer you a bottle of Chaos Drink in exchange!" Mystery Moon screwed up her face. "If you leave, there's not a single chance for the Detective Group to turn the situation around!"

"I already said I'm not one of you. Can't you listen?" Lily clapped her hand over her forehead, speechless but at the same time relieved. She was happy that Mystery Moon was not as fragile as she had thought.

After a long silence, Lily took the ten dollar bill from Mystery Moon.

"You agreed?" Mystery Moon's face lightened up.

"No." Lily tapped the desk. "I have many things to deal with and have absolutely no time to play games with you. But I can give you a hint as a return for your 10-dollar note. I can also give you my counsel provided that it won't take up my work hours. At least, my advice would be much more practical than befriending some random witch."

"What hint?"

"I'm not the right person to help you expand your team. Not everyone in the Witch Union is as busy as Soraya. You can turn to

those idlers." Lily felt guilty for selling out those witches and muttered an inaudible "sorry" under her breath. "Think about it. Who else helped you find the clues in the arson of the Academy?"

"Um... do you mean Evelyn? No, I can't ask her. Although the group activities won't take a lot of time, she still needs to manage her own tavern."

"Not her."

"Um... then Amy?" Mystery Moon looked hesitant. "But she isn't from Graycastle and she has her own companions as well..."

"Isn't that even better? Once she joins the Detective Group, all the other witches from the Kingdom of Wolfheart would follow." Lily counted on her fingers. "Annie can be busy, but neither Hero nor Broken Sword is. Plus, you have a joint project with Broken Sword... Does it really matter to you where they come from? Joan's from the Fjords. Why don't you have a problem with that?"

"I see!"

"And then there are the combat witches who previously belonged to the Bloodfang Association. They have a lot of free time and shouldn't refuse if you ask. Now the Detective Group will have a lot more members than the Exploration Group. At least, you outnumber them. But remember not to bother His Majesty, nor should you challenge the Exploration Group at random." Lily advised. "I just feel that it's impossible for you to beat them, although I don't know why."

"Because you favor them." Mystery Moon pouted.

"No, I don't! Anyway, that's all that I want to say. Now go to bed and don't bother me again." Lily waved.

"Alright..." But Mystery Moon soon turned around again.

"What's the matter?" After experiencing some mood swings, Lily found herself be more patient than before.

"Well, it would be better to get things straightened out now than have a problem later," thought Lily.

"That ten dollar note is your reward if you join the Detective Group..." Mystery Moon said hesitantly. "Since you've decided not to, can I have it back?"

At that moment, Lily heard something break in her heart.

" NO WAY! GET OUT OF HERE!"

Chapter 959: Witnessing History

The next day was Neverwinter's fourth holiday in autumn and the first weekend in mid-autumn.

As there weren't any stories such as Genesis told in this world, most people were busy all year around looking for food. Since Roland implemented the rule of "one day off every seven days", his subjects owed their gratitude to him. No one would complain about such a kind lord who let them take a day off without deducting their pay.

In particular, all the refugees, who moved in from other cities, were so determined to settle in Neverwinter after they had experienced the life here, that even the demons that City Hall had announced all over Neverwinter could not scare them off. Compared to hunger and poverty, even the demons had become insignificant to them.

According to Barov's report, the rest day system scarcely impacted the production of Neverwinter and after it was officially popularized, workers could take rests of their own free will. Many people chose to work on the holiday to get paid more. Moreover, the trade of the city grew substantially, largely thanks to the booming business in the square where people visited every weekend. The square had attracted not only local merchants but also the traders from other cities, who would set up their stalls on weekends and then replenished their stock with the specialties of the Western Region during the weekdays before they went back their homes and made a fat profit by selling them.

With more concrete boats put into use, the goods circulated much faster in the market with a cycle time shortened to just weeks, which was something beyond imagination a year ago. In the past, the nobles and dealers in the inland cities, such as Redwater City, could only eat pickled fish, yet now refrigerated fresh fish shipped from Shallow Port was able to be served at their

dinner table.

In light of that, Roland decided to set the activities, like important speeches, demonstrations, and all kinds of commendation ceremonies, on rest days, trying to take advantage of people's shopping habits to further boost trade. As the goods were sold and the deals were made, he could collect more taxes, which would certainly make up for the wages he paid to his people on rest days. In summary, it was a move that served multiple purposes.

This weekend was no different. Under the cloudless sky, the last hint of the warmth of summer mingling with the cool breeze of autumn had created another perfect day for people to go out. From the dock of the inland river to the northern city wall, the streets were packed with people who were waiting in anticipation.

Yet, this time, they were not on their way to the Convenience Market, where they could buy some good meat, but were here to witness their king's new invention.

An unprecedented transport, "the train", was about to make its first trial run.

Victor, the jeweler, was among the crowd.

After hearing the news of the trial from the City Hall's propaganda, he immediately handed over the big deal he was negotiating to his men and embarked on the concrete boat traveling from the old king's city to Neverwinter that very night.

Victor was definitely among those who were highly impressed by the changes in the Western Region over the past few years. He had visited the lord of the land when it was merely an isolated, small town and only had a hazy memory of the lord, who was a fat middle-aged noble and always complained about how barren his land was. If it was not for the fine gemstones that he could get from the town, Victor would never have traveled beyond Longsong Stronghold.

Victor used to only visit the Western Region once a year, and whenever he came, the small border town was as dilapidated and decayed as it had been before. But in the last three years, he had visited here much more often, and the frequency had grown to once per month, particularly after Roland Wimbledon announced that he was building a city here.

It was as if the Western Region of Graycastle had become different world.

Time must run quickly here as a single day turned into the equivalent of months of progress and those months turned into years as he could not see how Neverwinter had changed so fast.

As Victor entered a tavern by the street, the owner immediately came over and welcomed him, "I knew you would come. The table by the window on the third floor has been specially reserved for you."

He quickly pulled out a silver royal and tossed it to the owner. "Lead the way."

"Alright. Please follow me."

Victor, who had been a regular of the tavern, naturally did not have to stay with the crowd on the street. There were also many people on the third floor, but at least he could have a better view.

People around him had been in heated discussions about the demonstration today.

"The train is going to run on that narrow street? That's too far from the square and residential areas."

"Street? Ignorance! That's called a railway, the thing used in the mining area," someone said, laughing. "Since it's not built for people to ride, it's better to be placed somewhere less crowded. Do you take it as a wagon?"

"You mean the thing in the Silver City's mine?"

"Yes, it was manufactured here and needs a steam engine to work."

Victor could not help joining the discussion. "I've seen the cart driven by the steam engine. Its great advantage is that it is immune to different terrains. But if it's put on flat ground, even mules are able to replace it. So I don't think it works as simply as you said, or the City Hall wouldn't call it 'an era-defining transport'."

"Perhaps it's only a stunt," a man murmured.

"Go away," the people around the man cried immediately. "Is this your first time in Neverwinter? King Roland never boasts."

The man looked unconvinced and wanted to argue but was abruptly interrupted by a loud whistle from far away.

"Woo—————"

"It's coming!" The atmosphere of the room went wild. Everyone looked out of the windows and stared unblinkingly at a small street near the Castle District. Some of them even took out telescopes.

Victor also looked at where the sound came from.

A long and black beast appeared behind the houses, coming slowly in sight. It was huge, and above its two wheels was its head that looked like a metal pail, on top of which there was gray smoke pumping out, just like a working steam engine.

A wagon ran alongside the head of the train, drawn by two horses, moving as fast as the train, as if the two were completing. However, since the wagon was laden with ore, the driver of the cart must keep whipping to drive the horses forward, and every step the horses took was strenuous. If the hub of the wheel was not iron-forged, the wagon would have collapsed already.

As the full exterior of the train was revealed, Victor, despite himself, felt the hairs on his back stand up.

Carriages, one after another, followed the head of the train. Each

was four or five times larger than the wagon and laden with ore. In terms of volume, one carriage was almost on a par with a cargo sailing ship on the inland river.

The point was that the train contained more than one carriage.

For a moment, all the audience exclaimed with admiration.

"Four...the fourth!"

"The fifth!"

"There can't be more!"

"My God! The sixth!"

"There's more, the seventh!"

The monster-like head trailed a total of seven carriages, moving steadily across the clearing before the castle.

Now Victor found the answer to his question.

There was a big difference between a steam engine that was fixed in the entrance to the mine to power the carts and a steam engine that could move independently and freely.

The latter could carry goods to wherever the railway stretched. The weight would no longer be the bottleneck of land transportation. On the contrary, the capability of the train would outstrip that of the river transportation. His Majesty could even empty a city in a short time by carrying everything away on the train if he wanted.

Being born as the son of a merchant, Victor naturally knew the importance of transportation, which was often the reason why most cities were built near rivers. Obviously, such kind of transport would bring limitless possibilities for the circulation of the resources, so the word "era-defining" was far from being over dramatic.

An unspeakable feeling came over him, he could feel content and lost and... It was like he had witnessed history yet meanwhile he

had been forsaken by history. The lords in other kingdoms were still drowning themselves in pleasures and traveling by horses and mules on the road that was paved with bricks and full of mud.

They, however, were entirely unaware of what had happened here and still felt good about themselves.

Somehow, an idea emerged in Victor's head.

The future had already come, yet it did not arrive at all places equally.

Chapter 960: New Enemies Spotted

In the days following the train's demonstration, there was an air of enthusiasm in Neverwinter.

Even Roland could feel it in the castle. It was not his opinion but a conclusion based on the data in a report sent from City Hall.

Barov held the report and said, filled with joy. "The applications for citizenship we've received In the past three days are 60% more than that of normal times, and half of the applicants, about 725 people, have just moved in less than two months ago. In other words, it only took us three and a half months to get the number of applications that should have taken us five months to collect! The number of applicants decreased slightly after the demons' attack, but now it not only offsets the difference, but also shows a surge, which means that we don't need to worry about people's concern over the demons anymore. Your Majesty, the demonstration is a huge success."

Since Roland introduced the Data Statistics and Comprehensive Analysis to the management, the City Hall Director started to put numbers in his report. As time went on, more numbers were adopted and went into detail. It seemed to Barov that no conclusion could be brought forth without comparing data. Besides, he also invented some formulas for analysis, and one of them was called "period between the Arrived and the Settled".

Barov explained that the formula showed how determined the migrants were to become the citizens of Neverwinter. After the identity card was added in the city's rules, any refugees who wanted to be an official citizen had to come to the City Hall and submitted their application. Generally, one who had any specialties or a permanent residence would be eligible. In addition, the applications from people who had passed the examination of City Hall and had no bad records would be accepted by City Hall as well.

The newcomers, in spite of themselves, started to look forward to the card. In addition, because they made livings in different industries, it took them different periods of time to be able to afford a downpayment. Hence, Barov tried to calculate the average period of time those people spent, and in his opinion, the shorter the period was, the more loyal the people were to their king and the more faith they had in the new king's city.

However, Roland took a different view of that conclusion. He never trusted the loyalty of strangers. They might have real faith, but ultimately, they cared more about whether their own welfare was secured.

At any time, it was reasonable for anyone to side with the stronger, so showing the strength at the right time could significantly increase the cohesiveness of the people. The train was a good choice. Even though most people did not know what it really was, the overwhelming feeling that the huge size, the hundreds of tons of weight, and the roar of the cylinder had brought to them was unmistakable.

Even Thunder was awestruck by the train when it ran through the railway near the Castle District in an unstoppable way. Unlike ocean transportation, the weight of goods had always limited the land transportation, yet the train would apparently break that barrier. Thunder even joked that when he was too old to have any more adventures, he would move his whole family to Neverwinter, where the life was also a kind of adventure, for there were so many new things emerging all the time.

If the train could amaze the most famous explorer in Fjords, then its shock to the common people was beyond expression.

Where else could they find a place so promising?

Barov continued, "Also, we've received invitations from many merchants, some of which come from the Chambers of Commerce in Redwater and Silverlight. They've eagerly begged an audience. I

think they want to know more about the train."

"Refuse them all," Roland said, smiling. "The train is not for sale at present, and they can't afford it even if I was willing to sell it. But you can promote other goods to them, like the first and the second generations of steam engines retiring from the mining area."

Neverwinter was not the poor border town any longer, and not all Chambers of Commerce were eligible to be received by Roland. For those who did not have a special association with him, the City Hall Director would be enough to handle them.

"I see." Barov touched his beard and said.

"Since the people were in high spirits, how about carrying out the new reserve force system?" Roland changed the subject.

Barov nodded. "No problem, I think. But... Your Majesty, do you really think the war would go that badly?"

"It's just in case. In a war that determines the fate of all human beings, shouldn't we take it more seriously?"

After Roland returned from the war, he had ordered the General Staff to draft the new reserve force system. It mainly contained two parts: Military education and training, and expanding the reserve force. Military education and training would be introduced into the primary education in order to train the students' basic awareness of discipline and knowledge of fighting. Expanding the reserve force would be carried out without interfering with the production. During the progress, the people would be trained in batches with all kinds of fighting skills. It could be regarded as a sort of militia.

Since the new military system was mandatory, it would not be more appropriate to carry it out at the moment when the people were enormously enthusiastic. Once the system began, Graycastle's military would become an organism that would be able to heal

itself. That meant when the front line lacked men, the rear was able to send back up soldiers without any delay, while in the past, every batch of recruits had to run through two or three months' training all over again before they were qualified.

Roland planned to recall the Second Army, which had been turned into reserve troops, to Neverwinter, because the threat from the Timothy and the church had been lifted in the Longsong District. In addition, the previous two-pronged attack had reminded him of the necessity to set up a second army. When the Battle of Divine Will broke out, he did not need to personally march an army on the front line.

"Meanwhile, you can start preparing for the next military conscription," Roland commanded. "When the Months of Demons end, I want to see the soldiers in the official troops exceed 10,000 men, whose equipment was also well matched. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Barov promised without hesitation.

"Good, you can leave now... Wait!" Roland suddenly frowned.

"What else can I do for you?" Barov stopped and asked at once.

Roland's attention, however, was completely caught by Nightingale's words right now. She said, "News from Sylvie has just arrived. It's reported that she had spotted new movements from the demons. It seems that the Devilbeasts have expanded their patrol area and are building a new camp."

"Call them back immediately," Roland commanded her under his breath and then turned to Barov and said, "Convene a meeting of the officials from all departments. Something happened in the north."

...

Soon, the meeting room was full of people.

Sylvie, who had never been in a such a meeting, looked nervous

when she was stating the details. Fortunately, Lightning quickly joined her and helped her tell the whole story.

It had been a routine investigation.

Due to the threat from the flying Devilbeasts, Roland had banned Lightning, Maggie, and Lorgar from going to the relic area of Taquila alone for safety reasons. Yet in order to keep an eye out for a sign of the demons, Maggie would carry Sylvie to investigate the edge of the area every four days. The phantom instrument had failed to locate the target precisely so that they had to rely on the witches to make up for its failings.

Thanks to the Eye of Magic, that could see far beyond the demons' range, they only needed to frequently fly out and watch the area from a safe distance.

But this time, the investigation team had spotted a trail of Devilbeasts within the distance that they thought was perfectly safe.

Chapter 961: Two Plans

"What do you think?" Roland asked, looking at the light curtain on the wall. There was no doubt that Taquila survivors were the most qualified to analyze the demons' intention.

"It's an old trick of them," Alethea snorted coldly. "Due to intimidation failing to work, they will do it the hard way. As I've said before, they're great at combining intimidation with force to deal with the human lords. If it were a city of witches they confronted, they'd slaughter all the citizens once and for all."

"But last time you estimated that it would take them about half a year before they pushed towards us."

"Ahem, that's a result calculated from the average time they need to build a large camp. Maybe they're hasty this time." Alethea's voice sounded a little awkward. "The war situation is always changing. One would be foolish to stick in the mud. I didn't tell you to let down your guard."

"What? Are you kidding?" Roland knew it was necessary to keep watch on the enemies. But when and how to fight back was planned according to the time she had calculated. If the enemies had to spend half a year taking hold, his railway would've been able to stretch before them. By then, with an armored train and railguns, Roland was confident that the demons would have no energy to build any outposts.

"Alethea didn't mean to hide that on purpose. I agreed with her before," Agatha said, seeming to read Roland's doubt. "The Union had paid a high price for the timetable regarding the expanding of the red mist supply line. It remained right even before the Holy City fell. Half a year is the shortest period the demons need before their next move."

"You mean the demons need less time now and that the timetable that had cost so many lives is useless?" Edith shrugged. "Of course,

it's understandable to see 400-year-old intelligence become invalid."

Roland felt his eyebrow twitching. The Pearl of the Northern Region, without any doubt, was among the ordinary people on the scene who dared to confront the blob monster. Considering that he was not a typical virtual person in this world, Edith would be the only one here who had the guts.

As expected, Alethea howled, "Common person, how dare you!"

Pasha chimed in before Alethea lost her temper. "Perhaps, it's the giant skeleton that makes the red mist supply line expand faster or the demons are planning something else. If they don't aim at attacking, they surely can set up an outpost earlier. After all, the supply of the red mist will determine how big the outpost will be. Hence, there is no need to quarrel with each other about it. It's his Majesty who gets the final say on how to tackle this problem."

Pasha lived up to the title of the real leader of the Taquila survivors, Roland nodded to himself. What she had said not only put down the possible quarrel but also took his feeling into account. Conversating was indeed an art.

The problem was still there. Whether the demons were plotting something else in the dark or they wanted to march toward Neverwinter soon, the result was that due to this change, Roland could not watch the relic of the Holy City anymore. In fact, Neverwinter did not have many choices. If phantom instrument could locate the target precisely, he might have more time to observe the enemy and see what they planned to do, but now he had to root out this obstacle before him as soon as possible.

"Get the First Army ready to march." Roland drew a deep breath and commanded Iron Axe.

"Yes, Your Majesty!" Iron Axe answered briskly as he always did.

"A bold choice," Alethea praised. "Turning a blind eye to the

coming war is no better than suicide. Only by keeping a close eye on the enemies' movement could we be better prepared."

"General Staff, come up with, at least, a plan before tomorrow nightfall." Roland cast a glance at Edith on purpose. "I also want to see how you deduce the plan."

"Your Majesty," Ferlin Eltek, Knight Morning Light, who had formally changed his career, said grimly. "According to Lady Sylvie, the flying Devilbeasts have taken over the place. It's almost impossible for the First Army to march on while staying unnoticed. Once we give ourselves away, we'll get stuck."

Roland knew that too. That was why he wanted to know the exact inference of the plan before they acted. He who designed the weapons for the army certainly knew that Ferlin had made his meaning clear in a tactful way. The anti-aircraft machine gun would lose most of its power if the soldiers could not set it up and take aim in advance. Moreover, unlike the defensive battle on the city wall, the enemies would come from all directions, which made it hard to preset the suitable barrage.

Besides, the construction of the railway was not finished yet, so they had to travel by foot to carry the war materials, and if the enemies intercepted the transport corps, it would be a significant loss.

There were about 400 kilometers between Neverwinter and the suspected outpost. Even though they subtracted the journey in the Misty Forest, they still had 170 kilometers to go, which could not be traveled in one day. Besides, the army would need to set up a camp, and according to the number of soldiers, there will be many tents to pitch. As a result of this, all the steps to make the camp would increase the risk of being spotted by the flying demons and that would become his army's Achilles heel.

Roland did not have as many men as Sylvie who could keep every transport corp away from the enemies during their journey. Nor

did he depend on those recruits to fight back hard when they were attacked. If the army's supply line was destroyed, it might not be able to pull out, let alone push forward.

But he could not let anyone see his irresolution at this crucial moment. "I need to see the plan before we work out anything else."

"As you command, Your Majesty," Ferlin said with a hand on his chest.

...

A night slipped away unnoticed. The General Staff handed over the plan in the afternoon the next day.

There were two of them.

Edith Kant would be the reporter.

"You've stayed up all night?" Roland asked, noticing some slight puffiness under her eyes.

"Everyone was working so hard. How could I take a rest alone?" Edith shrugged. "Just take it as compensation for the mistake I made last time."

"Is she complaining?" Roland could not help asking inwardly. He then waved his hand and did not take it seriously. "Tell me the conclusion."

"Okay." She pointed at the left sheet of paper and said, "If we march on, as usual, the Devilbeasts will surely spot the main body of our troops. By then, the commander's ability will determine how the battle will turn out. Because the General Staff doesn't have the corresponding information, we just assume the worst. Our conclusion is that the First Army can accomplish the mission. However, they'll be routed by the demons and only half of the army, about 2500 men, can retreat to Neverwinter. The witches won't be in great danger, and all of them can safely escape if they don't make any rash moves."

"The result doesn't seem good." Roland rubbed his forehead. "Is there anything wrong with the logistics?"

"Yes," Edith said bluntly. "Once the demons attack the supply line, the First Army has to send reinforcements. However, it's impossible to stifle the enemies completely. As time goes the casualties get heavier, men's morale lower and the soldiers at the front get disheartened too. A week later, the attack from the enemies will become harder to track, and meanwhile, the main army starts to attack the enemies' camp, which can be regarded as the simplest part of the whole war. Your army will succeed in destroying the enemies' outpost, but the rear will be on fire."

"You mean Neverwinter?"

"No, it's a fire in the Misty Forest set by the demons, who have noticed something wrong in the forest. The fire will burn down the safe passage opened by Lady Leaf so that the transport corps have to take a detour, which is three times longer. That means the supply for the First Army will be cut off completely. As a result, the army starts to lose its advantage and has no choice but to withdraw." Edith cleared her throat and continued, "Of course, the number of the demons might be assumed a little high, but there is no certainty about that. Judging from the enemies' urgent action, I'm afraid they won't give up the outpost so easily."

Roland was amused. "The assumption of the high number of the enemies seems tolerable. But who the hell bring up the idea of a fire in the forest?"

"It's Knight Morning Light," Edith said imperturbably. "But after the analysis, we believe it's possible if the war lasts long enough for the demons to notice something wrong in the Misty Forest."

Roland had been ready to see any result, but he was still depressed by such an adverse inference. "What about the second plan? Don't tell me you came to the same conclusion. Are you busy all night for a negative answer?"

Roland also knew that if he wanted to rival the demons on the Fertile Plains, he needed to face the limit of the land transportation sooner or later. He would not bother to build a railway so hastily if he could quickly send the ammunition and the food to the soldiers at the front.

"No, Your Majesty." The Pearl of the Northern Region chuckled. "The second plan is different. Since we can't guarantee the safety of the supply line, we just let it disappear."

Chapter 962: The Invisible Supply Line

"Oh?" Roland asked, raising his eyebrows. "Go ahead."

"Since the Taquila devouring worm can tunnel through the mountains of the Impassable Mountain Range, they can also be used to open up a passage under the Barbarian Lands," Edith said, as she held up two fingers. "Two worms working in parallel will be able to create a passage wide enough to allow a wagon to pass through it. I've already asked Minister Karl about it. The result he arrived at is that the unstable structure of the mud lands may make it impossible for us to open up a space that can accommodate an underground palace, like the one in the Third Border Town, but if we go deep enough, we should be able to open up a passable tunnel."

"How do we go about it?"

"The construction work should start within the main camp of the First Army. The entrance to the passage can be a shaft heading underground from the center of the camp, covered by a tent and disguised as an ordinary structure."

"What are we going to do with the passage after we retreat?"

"We seal the shaft and cover it with soil, leaving behind only a vent to maintain air circulation."

"How long the construction will take us?"

"It's expected to take two weeks more than the time needed to march the army to the combat zone. In fact, considering possible harassment from the demons, it's reasonable to assume we'll march slower. In this way, the greatest disadvantage of the First Army can be bypassed as well, as the army will appear in the shape of a fist, while the logistics tail behind it will be hidden. This 'fist' would instantly attract all their attention."

Roland could not help curling his mouth into a smile. It seemed

that after a long night of consideration, this plan had already matured quite well.

"Were you the one who proposed this idea?"

"Kind of," Edith admitted honestly. "But it was a result of the cooperation between many departments. In addition to the Ministry of Construction, the Arithmetic Academy also joined in, though they weren't aware of the details of the second plan."

Roland wanted to praise Edith as being well-deserved of her reputation as the Pearl of the Northern Region. The most valuable point of this plan was not thinking the novelty of the idea itself but how she had exploited all the resources and tools available to refine the idea.

Ordinary people would never have taken the monster-like worm into account.

Also, the Arithmetic Academy had just been established for less than a year and, apart from the star observation, it had only been working on the tasks given by Roland. But she had already been trying to use the more professional personnel from this new department to perform the calculations and statistics for the underground passage.

It was gratifying to find someone had such accommodating views and extraordinary foresight.

In addition, somehow he had a faint illusion that the Edith in front of him seemed more remarkable than before, as if he had uncovered a deeper layer of her talents.

"Nice work," Roland encouraged. "Just follow this plan."

"Yes," Edith paused. "But there's one more thing I need to point out. Even if we adopt the second plan, casualties will still be unavoidable. Moreover, it won't be an easier battle than the one against the church at Coldwind Ridge. After all, the demons have the initiative this time, so before the First Army reaches the

destination, they won't be able to set up stations and blockhouses to defend themselves as they did before."

"So, are you inclined to halt the troops and bide our time?"

"No, I intend to crack this nut, no matter how hard it is," she said slowly. "If the Battle of Divine Will is as cruel as the Taquila witches have said, it's absolutely necessary for the First Army to experience a trial of blood and fire before that war. It's only you who, I always think, cares so much about the soldiers' lives that you have to think twice before taking every step. Now that our new enemies, the demons, are unknown to all of us, and also possess inhuman abilities, so please be prepared for some casualties."

"This feels a little weird..." Roland thought. In the past, Edith was unlikely to say such words to her superiors, for her words would definitely have been viewed as an insult. Edith was too clever to make such a simple mistake at this level.

"Is it a backlash triggered by my reprimanding her last time?"

"But who cares?"

"As long as she serves me well, the rest is irrelevant."

"I see. You may take your leave," Roland said.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

When Edith withdrew, Nightingale showed up looking discontent. "How could a lord be wrong to care about his men? She obviously crossed the line!"

"I don't think she's wrong." Roland smiled. "Everyone has the right to their own beliefs. A wise leader must listen to all the different points of view in order to make a right decision." However, Roland disagreed in his heart. He had to think twice and take all aspects into consideration because he could not bear any losses at present. His soldiers were not a rabble of mercenaries and serfs. Almost all of them were literate. Some officers even

understood charts and were able to make reports. He would take any action to reduce casualties.

Just as Nightingale was about to say more, the Sigil of Listening hanging across her chest suddenly glowed.

Roland's heart skipped a beat. He asked, "Is there some new movement from the demons?"

The communication was short. Almost right after Roland asked out loud, Nightingale gave her answer, her hand still pressed onto the sigil on her chest, "No, it's good news. The third batch of the witches from Sleeping Island, led by Lady Camilla Dary, will arrive at Neverwinter tomorrow evening."

"It was Tilly who sent the news..." Roland felt relieved. "Go and tell Wendy to welcome them in the same way did the last two batches."

These witches would be the last batch to move in, which accounted for almost half of the total witches of Sleeping Island. Now that Neverwinter had built the framework of Sleeping Spell, Roland could rest assured that Wendy would be able to take care of everything, including counting all the witches' abilities and recruiting them. For the rest of the witches, he believed that they would sooner or later accept the fact that the Kingdom of Graycastle was different from the one they remembered.

"No problem." Nightingale seemed to have already forgotten Edith's words. As she was about to enter the misty world, Roland suddenly stopped her.

"Hang on... Did you say that it was Camilla Dary leading the witches? The one who is preparing to go to the Sealine with Joan?"

"Yes, what's wrong?"

"Let me see..." Roland pondered for a moment. "The scenario Edith presented assumed that the demons always had the initiative. But maybe I can reduce their range of vision."

"Ugh, are these two things correlated?" Nightingale asked in a state of confusion.

"I'm not sure, but I have to try," Roland said with great interest. "I need to talk to Camilla personally when she arrives."

As the boat sailed along the Redwater River into the Western Region, the fields on both sides of the river turned yellowish-brown, a color of harvested straw mixed with soil.

Judging from the high piles of straw, this year must have been another bumper year.

Standing at the bow of the ship, Andrea gulped the refreshing air of autumn. It mingled with a unique smell of the sun-baked farmland, giving her an inexplicable feeling of relaxation and contentment.

She did not know whether it was the lingering charm of the harvest or her anticipation of finally coming home.

Maybe both.

"Don't... they collect the straw?" A curious voice suddenly came from behind. "They make good kindling."

Andrea turned around and saw that it was a God's Punishment Witch who was speaking. Her name was Carol, if she remembered correctly.

"You know about it?" Andrea had asked her father about the straw when she had been a little girl. She had wondered why the farmers collected, baled, and piled the straw up after cropping the wheat. Her father told her that they had done it for the sake of living.

He had said, "They don't have enough money to buy firewood, so they have to collect anything that can be burnt to keep them warm against the cold winter winds. The straw is a very good fuel,

flammable and accessible, which is also preferred by many nobles who often use it to start a fire. When the people are short of clothes, they often use the straw as quilts. Although it produces thick smoke when it burns and pricks your skin when you sleep on it, it keeps the people from freezing to death. You may think the straw is useless, but for those who need it, it's as integral to their lives as the ear of wheat."

Chapter 963: The Ultimate Form of a Gun

At that time, she did not understand the question. It was only after she was exiled from the City of Glow and experienced those days without shelter and food during the escape that she began to realize the heavy burden of "life".

However, Andrea did not expect to hear this question again from a Taquila survivor.

"Why shouldn't I know about it?" Carol asked, winking and smiling at her.

"No, I didn't mean that..." Andrea was a bit embarrassed and answered, "I thought you ancient witches never had to pay any attention to these matters."

"Because the common people took care of everything?" Carol asked, leaning on the railing, "In fact, I was never very different from those common people."

Andrea was a little surprised and asked, "How could that be true?"

"Although there is a fundamental difference between a witch and a common person, how could the Union spare too much energy for a weak non-combat witch? Unlike Phyllis, my ability and magic power were of the lowest rank after awakening, so I was almost forgotten by the Union during the latter part of the war." She looked at the waves as if she was recalling the past days. "During the days when I lost the allowance, I lived with a group of common people. After the city was invaded, I also relied on them to persist right up till the very last moment."

"But in the battle in the Kingdom of Dawn, your abilities were completely unlike those of a non-combat witch..."

Even Ashes the Extraordinary would not have been able to defeat her.

"Training for hundreds of years is enough to change everything," said Carol, opening her hand and clenching it slowly. "In fact, when compared to those previous companions, I even feel a little fortunate that I've become a God's Punishment Witch. At least I've become stronger now. I'm no longer ignored, and I'm able to do something for everyone. Since we met His Majesty, it's also been a new kind of reward."

Andrea suddenly realized that she might not have started talking to her for no reason. She asked, "Why... do you tell me these things?"

Carol looked up and answered, "Because I envy you."

Andrea was stunned and stared blankly at her.

"With your ability, even in the days of the Union, you would have been an excellent combat witch. Since you were able to have a High Awakening at such a young age, you could have become one of Taquila's superiors.", The God's Punishment Witch said lightly, "Did you know? At that time, my greatest wish was to join the Blessed Army and get a blessing from Lady Natalia before a battle. You could achieve it easily. Now I've lost the possibility to become stronger. On the contrary, you're still far from your limits."

Carol paused and said, "The stronger you are, the more challenges you'll meet and the more setbacks you'll encounter. But don't forget, no matter how much hardship you experience, you're already enviable."

Hearing that, Andrea suddenly understood.

She was comforting her.

After her father's belated apology and the farewell to her childhood playmates, she had been feeling down for quite some time. It was only as she was getting closer and closer to Her Royal Highness that her mood gradually improved. Apparently, the God's Punishment Witch had noticed this and chose to share her

past experiences with her at this time.

That was right. These kinds of twists and turns were nothing to a Taquila survivor. As a witch, what she blessings she still had were far more than what she had lost.

"Thanks," whispered Andrea, after being silent for a moment.

Carol shook her head and replied, "I just told the truth." Then she stood up and walked back toward the cabin.

"By the way, about what you just asked," Andrea said loudly towards her back, "They bury the straw as fertilizer. After all, they don't need it for a fire in Neverwinter now."

The God's Punishment Witch did not look back, but made a gesture of "I understand".

Andrea also could not help raising her lips. She turned back to face the direction of Neverwinter, her heart full of expectation.

I wonder what Her Highness is doing right now? Ashes must make sure she stays next to her.

Needless to say, Shavi must be missing me. When I go back, I'll absolutely play cards overnight with her.

And when I traveled with Lorgar last time, Maggie helped to inform us of our journey in advance. At this moment she must be in the wastelands with Lightning, watching the demons' every move.

"Coo!"

A chirp came in the sky.

"Uh... Is this an illusion?" She seemed to have heard Maggie's cry.

As soon as Andrea looked up, she saw a fat pigeon descend from the sky and head straight for her face.

It's her indeed!

She could not find another pigeon heavier than Maggie.

"Ahem, you've become heavier!" Andrea pulled the pigeon down and spat the feather out of her mouth, "What about the demons in the northwest? Don't tell me that you're slacking off again!"

"Definitely not, coo!" Maggie argued, "It was His Majesty that told me to pick you up, coo!"

"But I'm coming soon..."

"I don't know either, but I'm absolutely not in the middle of nowhere, coo," said Maggie as she landed on the deck and turned into a Devilbeast. The ship immediately sank by a meter. "Hurry up. They're waiting for you, coo!"

For fear that the ship would soon turn upside down, Andrea immediately climbed onto her back and asked, "Wait... who... are 'they'?"

"Countess Spear and Miss Camilla, coo!" Maggie spread her wings and carried her toward Neverwinter.

...

They were not waiting for her in the Witch Building or Roland's castle.

An hour later, Andrea was directly brought to the outside of the boundary wall by Maggie. Besides Spear Passi and Camilla Dary, Anna, Sylvie, Lightning, Summer, and some other witches were also waiting for her on the grassland.

Roland was naturally there, as well.

"So you let her pick me up just to test a new weapon?" Andrea could not help holding her forehead after listening to the explanation. "Even if she hadn't come, I would have arrived at the inland river pier by tonight."

"But we can't afford to be delayed for a day," said Roland, simply telling her the news about the demons' strange move. "The First Army will start off tomorrow. Before it arrives at the entrance to

the tunnel, the weapon specially made for you must be adjusted to a usable state."

"Is that so..." Andrea slightly frowned. The demons' actions always gave her a feeling of unease. There was still a while before the appearance of the Bloody Moon, so the demons seemed to be far too active right now. Anyway, they would have to attach great importance to any movement of the demons. The overnight card playing plans had to be temporarily postponed. She replied, "Got it."

She turned to look at a peculiar "gun" among the crowd. It was strange to describe it as a gun, as it was far too large. The barrel was as long as an adult. It did not seem to be the type of weapon which could be carried by an individual while marching and fighting.

It was only possible for Ashes to move around with it.

"What kind of weapon is this?"

"Anti-armor... No, you can call it an anti-Devilbeast sniper rifle," Roland replied.

Chapter 964: Birth

According to Sylvie's observations, the reconnaissance team of the demons was usually made up of two Mad Demons and three Devilbeasts. They would patrol a set region back and forth at fixed intervals to cover a broad surveillance area with overlapping regions between the teams. It was like the "Wall of Eagles" in modern times.

Owing to the excellent field of vision of the flying demons, if the First Army were to enter the detection area, they would instantly be discovered. Roland intended to create a no-fly zone in the air, a blind zone of vision for the demons.

It was certain that there was neither any kind of radar system nor any instantaneous long-distance communication technology for the Mad Demons. As long as they did not blow the horn, the disappearance of a patrol team would not draw any attention. The Devilbeasts that were responsible for delivering the Red Mist cans could enhance the patrol range of the team, but this increased range would also delay the feedback of information. It was possible that the enemies would not notice the death of the Devilbeasts until the time they were supposed to return to their nests in the evening.

Even then, it would not be easy for the demons to locate the attacker immediately as the sniper team would attack from outside of their range of vision, not to mention that the patrol teams could not act at night, while the First Army could. As long as the blind zone in their surveillance network was reasonably arranged, it would gain time for the First Army and weaken the opponents' mobility.

Roland did not expect this strategy to completely block the opponents, but even a delay of two or three days would be a great help to the army. After all, the sooner they arrived at the shelling site, the greater the chance they would have.

The anti-Devilbeast sniper rifle was the product which would realize this hope.

In fact, it could barely still be called a gun. To ensure the long-range lethality and ballistic stability, its caliber was set at 20 millimeters, which was the demarcation point between a gun and a cannon.

As for why it was not designed to be larger, it was because Andrea's ability had a distinctive feature—it needed to be held and fired by hand. This point had been tested during the artillery training. Once she let go of the barrel, even if she gave oral instructions, the soldiers could still not adjust to operating the weapon.

What about opening fire in spite of the recoil of the cannon?

Tilly would be furious!

It was too awkward to call it a sniper cannon, so Roland decided to keep calling it a gun.

The new weapon itself did not employ much new technology. Its structure was much simpler than the Mark I type HMG, with an air guide backseat, semi-automatic shooting, bullet clip... The only extra part was a muzzle brake that was used to reduce the recoil, which had already been applied in the main artillery of the shallow water gunboats.

It only took two days to make it.

One and a half days were spent just on selecting the materials and post-processing.

Lucia created the alloy, Anna shaped it, Candle consolidated the shape and then Doris demonified it... This weapon was created together by several witches and could be regarded as a legendary product. In addition to its materials and processing technique, the gun barrel would not be deformed even under high-temperature gas and enormous pressure, which was also a key factor to ensure

continuous and accurate shooting.

"Is this a sniper rifle?" Andrea looked at it for a moment and noticed something unusual. "Where is its aiming scope?"

"It doesn't have one," Roland shrugged and said.

"Doesn't have one?" She was stunned, "I can't hit a target I can't see."

"An ordinary scope wouldn't help with the range we want, so three more people are here to help you," said Roland, looking at Sylvie, Spear, and Camilla who were standing by his side.

"Do you mean... to let Ms. Camilla connect me with Sylvie to aim, and have Countess Spear take charge of replenishing our magic power?" Andrea finally understood what Maggie's words "They're waiting for you" meant.

"Although I don't want to leave Fallen Dragon Ridge at all... ah, a-choo... Since Your Majesty was so kind to send an invitation to me, I can't say no." Countess Spear said with pretend reluctance, "But next time I wish to be informed earlier rather than let Miss Maggie bring me here by flight. I'm old and not strong enough. I'm still sick because of the cold wind."

Roland silently rolled his eyes. She had already drunk Lily's Cleansing Water and asked for the next batch of students trained by City Hall, but she behaved as if it was unpaid labor. After all, she had been an experienced politician for many years, and she was used to complaining about being hard up.

Camilla's response was much simpler, "Her Highness hopes for me to do my best."

"But I'm not sure if my ability will still be effective under the Eye of Magic." Andrea had never considered a similar issue before because the range of stones and bows was much lower than the limit of her visual range.

"So it's necessary to test it," said Roland. "Then... let's start."

Carter Lannis nervously paced back and forth outside the bedroom.

There were few days in his life where he had felt so disturbed.

In retrospect, except for that moment when His Majesty approached the witch Anna without any defenses, he had never been as nervous as he was now.

May, his wife, was about to give birth.

"As she said, 'Her status is as high as His Majesty's'," Carter joked at himself. "Have some courage. Be a man. Look what you have become. She's just giving birth to a child. Miss Nana and Lily are both here, and several nurses have also come from the hospital. Everything will be okay. Even if she has difficulty, they can cut her belly open to take the child out and keep both of their lives."

But this idea had just come out for a moment when he began to doubt it. "Can they really cut someone's belly to help her give birth to a child? No, no, no, that's too horrible. I hope it's the normal way."

Bastard, how dare you doubt the knowledge of His Majesty!

But... I've never heard of anyone being born like that.

These two voices were arguing in the chief knight's mind and made him feel like his head was splitting into two.

"Rest assured, Sir," said Irene, "Sister May will surely be okay, because... she's the toughest person I've ever seen."

The other members of Star Flower Troupe who had come to visit also nodded.

"Thank you," Carter said, but his worries were not abated at all. He felt sweat flow down his forehead.

All of a sudden, he heard a storm of cheers outside the window.

He went to the window and saw numerous people cheering for a troop who were dressed in the new style of military uniforms and were walking slowly over the street toward the frontier wall. The brown and green fabrics seemed disorganized but presented a sense of solidness, like a rock. The whole army was like a flowing chunk of land.

"Does the army start off today?" Carter could not help asking.

"Yes, my husband is there, too," said Irene, smiling with some reluctance but full of pride. "He's been looking forward to this battle for vengeance for a long time."

"Vengeance?" He echoed unconsciously.

"Yes! To comfort those who were killed by the demons! He told me so."

The once famous knight was now fighting for those ordinary people; the ideal country that His Majesty mentioned in the past was now becoming reality bit by bit. He was supposed to be one of them and should have been the first one to fight for His Majesty. Somehow, he was getting farther and farther away from them.

For a moment, the annoyance replaced the dispute in his mind, and his attention temporarily wandered.

Until a tender cry came from the bedroom.

Suddenly, all thoughts faded away.

The body responded faster than the brain. Before he knew it, he had already pushed open the door and rushed to the bed.

A baby with wrinkled skin was crying over the pillow next to May, while nurses were cleaning up in an orderly manner.

"Congratulations, my lord. It's a very healthy boy," someone laughed.

"Is... is it?" Carter moved to the bed step by step and knelt on one knee, staring at May who had sweat all over her head in the

candlelight. For a moment, he forgot what he wanted to say.

The long-lasting cheers from outside mixed with the child's cries, like a chorus to celebrate the new life.

May opened her mouth and tried to say something, but she was too weak to utter any words.

But Carter still understood what she wanted to say.

In that moment, tears poured out of his eyes.

"Now, you're a father," she had said.

Chapter 965: Secret in the Forest

It was in the hinterland of the Misty Forest, northwest of Neverwinter.

Snaketooth felt that ever since he had joined the railway construction team one and a half months ago, these days had become the most incredible period of his life.

"No..." He thought, "It's not appropriate to describe it as the most incredible. From time to time, I can always see something incredible. It seems that I have never really had a chance to know about the real Neverwinter."

He finally understood why the workers had to sign a confidentiality agreement.

The agreement required them not to share what they saw with anyone. Any kind of oral or written record would be regarded as a crime against the laws of the kingdom, and the punishment ranged from fines and confiscation of income to forced labor in the North Slope Mine. The agreement also stressed that they could quit from the construction team if they were unwilling to comply with the requirements. However, if they dared to violate it, the Security Bureau of the kingdom was responsible for checking them, and no one could escape from the ubiquitous supervision.

Snaketooth had once thought with disapproval, "It's possible to check all written records, but how could they police oral records as well? If they arrest anyone who is reported, then the project won't have enough people to be implemented anymore." However, he had a completely different view now. It was beyond his imagination how many secrets there were in Neverwinter. Maybe in some place which most people did not know about, there was a surging and amazing power.

What he was most impressed by were the witches.

Though Paper was also a witch, in his eyes she was just a little girl who needed his protection. The church claimed that the witches were evil as they inherited the power of the devil, but he did not care about that. If the witches were really so powerful, why would they be chased by the church and not dare to show up in public?

But this idea was changed by a witch called Lady Leaf.

Snaketooth never imagined that anyone could control the entire forest on her own.

The Misty Forest which the construction team entered was like the belly of a huge beast. This was especially obvious when they were paving the railway. The vines formed an endless network at the top of the roadbed. The iron tracks were wrapped and dragged forward to the appointed place by the vines and then fell to the ground like grapes in a vineyard. Wherever the railway was being laid, the trees on both sides would separate themselves, which even saved them the effort of cutting down the trees. At the same time, the surrounding trees would grow especially densely, covering the entire sky so as not to attract the demons' attention.

In addition, the forest could take the initiative to attack the beasts approaching the construction team. If they got a bowl of fresh meat soup someday, that meant an unfortunate beast ran into the domain of Lady Leaf.

Snaketooth had once seen her, but he could not be sure whether Lady Leaf was still human. Her body glowed with a strange green radiance which resembled a gem. When she moved, she could walk freely among the branches as if she had no real body.

If it had been the him from the past, he would surely have screamed loudly. With such ghostly deeds and an incredible appearance, it was not surprising that she would be regarded as one of the Devil's minions. His only thought was that Paper was lucky to not look like that.

However, Snaketooth did not hate her, and instead even had sincere respect for her, as His Majesty had mentioned at the Awards and Honor Ceremony that he was able to feed everyone in Neverwinter thanks to Leaf's help. Anyone freed from hunger and suffering was a beneficiary of her ability. By this merit alone, Leaf should forever be remembered.

Snaketooth was naturally one of the beneficiaries.

Apart from the witch, another discovery probably was his own personal secret.

It was after the First Army entered the Misty Forest.

Ever since the demons had attacked Neverwinter, the voices demanding a counterattack had become more and more fierce. Even in the Wild, the workers were also discussing this issue. He was not surprised that this day had come.

Every day a large number of soldiers marched to the front. Apparently, His Majesty intended to wage a war against the demons. Unlike the knights he had seen before, the soldiers were mostly acquaintances and neighbors of the workers. Whenever the army passed by, the workers would always greet them with enthusiasm. He had thought paving the railway away from the border would be dangerous and lonely hard labor, but it turned out to be the opposite.

Snaketooth did not have too many acquaintances, so he preferred to go and observe the train alone, and he even climbed up and touched it when it stopped.

However, what he had experienced two weeks ago was horrifying.

It was a locomotive dragging six carriages, which stopped in the section where he was participating in the construction, the latest section of the railway. There were two gigantic objects piled on the topless flatcar. Each of them was over 20 meters in length and

covered with a layer of canvas. He had no idea what they were.

This was originally normal. If the goods delivered had nothing to do with the construction team, it must have been military supplies, and he did not want to find out what it was. However, he had an upset stomach that night and had to run out of his tent at midnight. While he was looking for somewhere to empty the bowels, he was shocked to see the canvas creeping up by itself!

After several warriors who dressed distinctively different from the First Army soldiers untied the ropes fixing the canvas, a huge mollusk monster crept out of it! What was more horrifying, the monster could speak, and its voice was quite pretty! Its first words were: "I'm hungry! Do you have any food?"

At that moment, Snaketooth felt the hair stand up on the back of his neck. He could almost imagine the cold reply of the warriors, "Ah, yes, all the workers in this camp are your food. Enjoy yourself."

But this did not happen. The warriors embraced it affectionately and then moved ham, vegetables, and bread from the last carriage... They were all packed in barrels as tall as a man. The two worms gobbled up the food in a hurry and then disappeared into the depths of the forest with the warriors.

Snaketooth did not dare to breathe. He hid behind the trees until the footsteps faded away. Once he confirmed that they had left, he looked down to find that he had wet his pants...

Within two days, a strange station was built next to the track. It was an arched building made of cement and bricks, and inside it was a deep and bottomless hole. Though the workers walked in and out of it, no one knew where it led to. There were several steam engines beside the hole, constantly blowing wind inside. It was really weird.

He also firmly hid this secret in his heart.

Snaketooth had thought that he would be afraid and want to quit from the railway construction team. In reality though, he recovered faster than he had imagined. "This is an exciting life! This is the real image of Neverwinter!"

When he had just left his friends and arrived in the forest, he always felt that he was like a rootless piece of duckweed, not attached to anyone. Especially when the workers received letters from their families and happily shared them with him, loneliness haunted him. But he was gradually attracted by various novel things, such as the perfectly connected tracks, the beautiful songs in the forest, the huge desert wolf which appeared and disappeared secretly but would not be attacked by Lady Leaf, and the mysterious man who came here and whispered to himself on certain days...

This made him feel that he was a little closer to the unknown side of Neverwinter, and also gradually integrating with the city.

Snaketooth wanted to keep all these things in mind and wait for the day that he could tell his friends. There was no better proof of being a citizen than knowing the depths of a city. Even if he did not have so many familiar neighbors, no one could deny this.

The duration of the confidentiality agreement was five years.

He was looking forward to that day.

Chapter 966: Operation Summit

Two weeks after the counterattack plan, named "Operation Summit", was launched Roland received a report from Lightning, who was scouting on the front line. The battalions of the First Army had successfully completed the first step of the program and joined forces at "Forest No. 2+1.76" of the Misty Forest.

He borrowed the naming system of the turning points from the railway mileage identification method. The first half was the planned sectional station and the second half was the revised distance. That was to say, the turning point was located 1.76 kilometers ahead of Station No. 2 of the Forest Railway. The advantage of this method was that Roland could accurately see the military's route on the big map.

It was also the end of the current tracks. From here, the First Army would begin the second step of the plan—to leave the Misty Forest and march toward the northeastern direction of the Barbarian Lands without cover from Leaf.

Whether they could destroy the demons' outpost depended on this step.

As long as the Longsong Cannons and machine guns were set up, they could return to their tried and tested battle tactics from their training and previous encounters.

"I got it," Roland said, making a mark on the map. "How about the demons? Is there any sign of a response from them?"

Lightning's reply rustled through the Sigil of Listening, "Sylvie said that they haven't made any kind of response. They're still concentrating on building their own outposts, and have set up several black stone pillars. In addition, the red mist supply line has appeared behind the outposts. The Adviser Department's judgment is that the number of those long-legged monsters is limited."

This was good news, as Agatha had once stated that the only thing that limited the demons from overthrowing the humans was the Red Mist. If they had found a way around this restriction by the third Battle of Divine Will, it would spell bad news for everyone. For example, the mobility of the flying Devilbeasts and the horrifying fighting capacity of the Senior Demons would make the long border of the four kingdoms impossible to defend.

Roland now knew that the stone pillars at the outpost were different from the legendary Blackstone Pagoda, though they had much in common. The former could only store Red Mist and slowly release it to form a special mist environment for the demons to absorb. Within this environment, the demons' strength and self-healing abilities would be enhanced. In other words, it assisted the demons in battle.

The stone pillar could double the effect of the Red Mist; however, it could only consume reserves of it. On the other hand, the original Blackstone Pagoda could generate the Red Mist and also had much broader coverage, so it basically formed the core of the demons' main cities.

In addition, the stone pillar could not begin working as soon as it was planted. It had to be cultivated for about a month after being planted before it could release Red Mist. Until then it could only be used as an enlarged Red Mist can.

Sylvie's observations made him more confident about his judgment. No one wanted to see their enemies come back again after being driven away for a few days. It would be worse if they could recover and bring a bunch of reinforcements. At the current rate of railway construction, the First Army should be able to launch an attack on any new outpost before the stone pillars begin functioning at full capacity.

"In that case, keep up the scouting and let me know if you find something new. Remember that safety should always be the first priority."

"Roger that. Lightning out."

Then the light of the Sigil of Listening went out.

Roland picked up a ruler and measured the distance on the map. The First Army was supposed to enter the demons' reconnaissance perimeter in six days, by the beginning of late autumn.

Even for the army that was accustomed to fighting on the ground, this would be a tough challenge.

"Why are you worried?" Nightingale put away the Sigil and asked, "Weren't the results of the new weapon's tests pretty good?"

"In the end, that was just a test. No one can know what will happen in a war before it has even begun," Roland shrugged and said, "Not to mention that Sylvie will be occupied with the fight in the air, so the First Army has to depend on themselves to set up and maintain the defensive line."

"It's already pretty incredible that Andrea could consistently hit a balloon five kilometers away. She won't let us down as long as she has that weapon," Nightingale smiled and said, "Though Sylvie won't be available to keep a lookout for the army, Lightning and Maggie are still there. Hasn't the First Army experienced a scenario like this before?"

Roland raised his eyebrows in surprise and asked, "When did you learn to comfort others?"

"I'm just being honest," Nightingale whistled and said, "Of course, I'm also good at persuading people. I remember that every single noble I ever visited agreed with what I had to say."

Uh... that's just because of direct intimidation.

"Ahem, I guess you're right," Roland said, twitching his lips, "I'm going to have a nap in my office. Don't wake me up unless there's some urgent news."

Nightingale seemed to realize that something was unusual and

asked, "Right here? Should I inform the Taquila witches?"

"No," said Roland, "Don't even allow them to be near the castle."

"I see," she understood and said, "Don't worry. I'll make sure no one walks into the range of the light beam."

...

Roland rarely napped, unless he was particularly tired or for a special reason.

For example, this time was a special reason.

It had been a month since the last time he talked with Garcia in the Dream World. Now she had returned from her Headquarters. She had promised that she would bring back the book that was written half a century ago which first mentioned the Battle of Divine Will. For some reason, Roland felt it better to not let the Taquila survivors know about it for the moment.

He had considered it for a long time. No matter what he found in the book, he would probably be able to remain calm, while those witches who regarded the Divine Will as their ultimate fate could not. There was a battle looming on the horizon, so it would be better to not bother them with this.

Entering the Dream World was more like flipping a switch in his mind now. As long as he concentrated on it, he could fall asleep within a few seconds, which saved him the trouble of tossing and turning for hours.

After Zero went to school, Roland could not wait to pick up the phone.

"Hey? Did you get the book?"

"If I say no, would you be so disappointed that you'd throw your cell phone?" He soon heard Garcia's familiar sarcasm, "Relax, you reminded me three days ago. I'm not so forgetful that I'd eat my words, unlike a certain someone."

Roland was relieved and replied, "I won't. I still need to feed my family. I can't afford to throw it."

"Feed your family? Isn't the salary of martialist enough for you? Hey... Have you gone down the wrong path somewhere?"

"What are you imagining?" He whispered in his heart, "I'm trying to feed a group of people who haven't eaten for hundreds of years." He said, "I have to say, even if we are acquaintances—"

"Now you're going to accuse me of slander? It's a new era. Stop using this cliché, okay?" Garcia interrupted him.

Roland almost choked on hearing her words. It felt terrible being mocked about clichés by a woman from the middle ages...

He simply asked, "All right, so where's the book?"

"Of course, it's in my apartment. Come and get it." She replied.

Chapter 967: The Dreamland Book

Garcia walked into the main hall of room No. 0827, looking as if she had just taken a bath. Her morning tracksuit was now replaced by a red and white martial arts robe. Her cheeks were still flushed from the heat of the hot water; her beauty due to the Wimbledon family genes and her silky wet shoulder length hair made her a real sight to behold.

"Would you like something to drink?" She swayed the glass in her hand.

The first time that he had come to her house, there had been a cold and distant expression on her face... Well, she still hadn't changed much even after all this time.

"No, that's alright, thank you." Roland was curious and asked, "Do you have a competition today?"

"Have you ever seen an athlete who had to change and get ready at home? Staying warm right before a competition is one of the most important preparations for any sport." Garcia poured herself a glass of milk and sat opposite him. "Even the worst sports stadiums would still have a changing room—sometimes I really wonder if your common sense was also swallowed by the Erosion."

"Haha..." Roland tried to laugh off his embarrassment and said, "I thought martialists might have their own unique preparations before a match."

"In the eyes of the public, it's no different from any other sport. The only difference might be that it's generally more exciting and the prizes are better," she shrugged her shoulders and said, "I'm wearing this uniform because we need to take advantage of the influence of the martialists later."

"Huh? Are you going to shoot an ad?"

"It's a protest!" Garcia cried out in frustration, "Don't you ever

read the papers? The Clover Association is going to tear down the walls around North Tube Street. If we don't do anything, that their next demolition target will end up being this tube-shaped apartment. Your home will soon be in ruins!"

"Uh..." Roland had almost forgotten that there was such an event going on today. "Well... I wish you all the best."

"You—!"

"I've never competed before and no one's ever heard of me. I'm a complete newbie. I don't even own a martialist uniform." Roland feigned a regretful expression and said, "Even if I go, I won't be of much use."

"We can achieve anything through our combined efforts. Don't you know that?" Garcia picked up a list from the coffee table and shoved it in front of Roland. "Look at the people on that list. How many of them are martialists? They're all the lower-floor occupants of the tube-shaped apartment, yet they're all willing to go and protest with me! If we choose to be silent just because we're not well-known, then everyone will ignore our existence!"

Looking at the determination in Garcia's eyes, Roland felt his motivation rise along with her words. Whether it was facing the Erosion or her daily life, this seemingly cold and indifferent girl was far more enthusiastic than most people.

Is this the only place she can stay? No, with her background and abilities, she should easily be able to buy a new residence in the center of the city. She's doing this only for the sake of the other residents of this building. They're mostly ordinary people with meager salaries, there's no way they could afford to find a new apartment that has half the facilities and connectivity of this locality.

He was aware that they were all just phantoms of the Dream World, and that these occupants of the tube-shaped apartment were the defeated souls captured by Zero. However, with the world

progressing toward an unknown future on its own, he became doubtful about his original ideas. He could no longer distinguish between the phantom and real people. For example, he found it really hard to treat this vibrant and shining girl in front of him as an imaginary and empty shell. The longer he stayed in the Dream World, the more intense the feeling became.

Anyway, she did bring back the book for him. The least he could do was accompany her as a sign of gratitude.

Just as Roland was about to agree, he suddenly saw a familiar name on that list.

"Barolotsim".

That was the name of the tenant staying in apartment No. 0510. That was also the name of the only resident that was a demon.

This long name was particularly eye-catching among the information of the residents that had been collected by the Taquila witches. Hence just a glance was enough to leave a deep impression on him.

Roland was startled to see the name of the demon on that list, as it meant that 'he' would leave the tube-shaped apartment and join the residents in their protest—this could be a perfect chance to peep into his memory fragment.

"Ahem, I'm afraid that I already have an appointment for the afternoon... so I can only give you moral support." He glanced away, and pretended he had not seen that name.

Anyone else would have used the rights to the book as a bargaining chip.

But Garcia was different. She just stood up in a fury and said, "I should've known that saying all these words to you would be a waste of my breath." Then she walked into the bedroom in a huff, and soon she walked back out with an old leather red book.

At first, she looked like she was going to slam the book down in

front of him, but she quickly became softhearted and changed her mind. "This is the book that Master often mentioned to us. Since you have it now, you may leave!"

Roland casually opened a page and realized that there was no name of the author, but just the word "Unknown" in its place.

"Doesn't anyone know who the author is?"

"Why would it be marked as unknown if the author were known?" Garcia replied firmly, "Amongst the many books that are a part of the Association's library, this book wasn't famous due to its content, but rather because of its author. Apparently, the author died before he could finish writing the book, and the Association couldn't find any records of who he really was."

"He died when he was writing the book?" Roland was stunned for a moment and wondered if it was a sudden death. He had originally wanted to sit down for a private chat with the author—half a century was not considered long. If he was lucky, the author could still be alive. Even if he was dead, there would still be some news of him. At that time, recording cases was already part of the judicial system, and the author was even a martialist that had awakened the Force of Nature.

There was something fishy going on here.

"What's wrong? Are you afraid?" Garcia laughed and said, "Did it bring to mind those stories about being cursed and chased by ghosts? Don't worry, there's no evidence to prove that anyone who has read the book will die. Otherwise, I would never have recommended this book to you. But if you still don't want to read it, I won't make fun of you or tell anyone."

No, I'm sure you will...

Roland grabbed the book and nodded at her. "Thank you."

"Hmm." Garcia turned her head and did not say any more.

Roland went back as quickly as he could to apartment No. 0825

and locked the door. The protest would only start in the afternoon, so he still had a few hours to satisfy his curiosity.

Just like Garcia had mentioned, the title of the book was called "Raison d'être".

The cover was made of a type of red leather that could no longer be found in this era. The cover was backed by a thin layer of wood, hence it looked quite sturdy. Roland had thought that since it was related to the deities, the content would be full of spiritual stuff that he might not understand. However, once he turned the first page, he was immediately captured by the exquisite handwriting.

The text was on the left while the pictures or the excerpts were on the right. At the bottom, there was numbering that matched the content accurately. It did not look like a book of premonition, but more like a rigorous derivative thesis.

Those pictures had already faded and turned yellow, while the excerpts came from newspapers and magazines. In this day and age of the internet, it was already very difficult to see handwritten text and pictures made by using scissors and glue. The whole book felt old and antique, but the content was unexpectedly smooth and easy to understand. He had no problem reading it.

The first sentence was, "We have been deceived by the deities."

Chapter 968: A Piece of the Mystery Unravels

Roland's heart sank.

This style of opening resembled the eulogies of the Union survivors—that common people would never be able to defeat the demons. Through the handwriting, he could even imagine the pessimism and despair of the writer.

"The world is so distorted, yet we are totally unaware of it."

"Though we know that the Force of Nature comes from the Erosion loopholes, yet we still treat it as a gift from the deities simply because of the vast powers it gives us."

"This granting of power lets us feel lucky to be a part of it, yet it has also blinded our eyes."

"It is time for us to awaken."

"Though I don't know if it is already too late."

A single short paragraph had already caused Roland to become quite agitated. As the creator of the Dream World, he felt that these words were implying something. Could it be that someone had realized this world was just a made-up dream and wanted to warn everyone to wake up from it? Roland could return to reality upon awakening, but where would these people end up?

Regarding that paragraph about the Force of Nature, he strongly empathized with the author's thoughts.

The feeling of empowerment derived from transforming into an Extraordinary was far greater than that of being a political leader. No one would want to attribute all their power to a catastrophe. Even if they knew the truth, they would not bear to lose their power and hence would not even entertain the thought of stopping the apocalypse.

In the next dozens of pages, the book did not delve further into the conclusion made in the opening but changed directions—questioning why only mankind was capable of exerting the Force of Nature.

The photos and extracts were all from different modern scientific experiments and archaeological findings. Their descriptions and contents were all related to the main theme of the book.

"There is already enough evidence to show that intelligence is not the key to awakening the Force of Nature. Throughout history, there have been Fallen Evil that were mentally retarded, as well as martialists who had their powers from the moment of their birth. Without human intelligence, we are fundamentally the same as other animals, and in fact, we are highly similar. Our genes are the same, and so are our origins, as well as our behaviors and instincts. Whether it is a frog, a snake or a lizard, the warm sunshine will treat everyone equally, so why doesn't the Force of Nature behave in the same manner?"

"Is it because humans are the lucky ones on the evolutionary path?" Roland suddenly came up with this idea and found that the writer seemed to have read his mind. "Most people use luck as an excuse, just like the geocentric theory of the past—but in fact, the Earth is not the center of the universe. Humans are not the only species that can use the Force of Nature."

"Through observing history, we can see that records of civilization sometimes shown a fission-like split in development that occurs in sporadic bursts. For example, in the myths that have spread to the present, the descriptions of extraordinary abilities are mostly focused on a period around 2000 years ago—this was much earlier than the anthropological records of man. It seemed as if we had a sudden awakening, and from that, we derived unbelievable strength. The number of descriptions of the enemies also increased accordingly. Whether it was demons, beasts, monsters, or aliens, they all had different shapes and forms, but

they also had a common point: a common person could not defeat them, and only the awakened heroes were capable of being their worthy opponents."

"Although there is no direct evidence, I have always believed that those alien species were not figments of the imagination that the ancients conjured up out of thin air but rather real living species. Their abilities were like ours, and that was why the mythology of that period was so vivid."

"At this moment, the reader might think of excuses such as the ancient mosquitoes who could preserve their remains in amber, yet these alien species did not leave any remains. This excuse might sound a little far-fetched. On the other hand, it is because they disappeared without a trace despite so many mentions of them that they grab our attention, right? There are so many incredible relics in the world, many of which are buildings and monuments that were completely different from the construction styles of the people of that era. Some of these buildings were even far too advanced to be built by the people of that era. However, we have still stubbornly classified them as divergent branches of our own civilization and credited the works to the local indigenous leaders. This is a gross overestimation of the capabilities of humans."

"In order to find more answers, I have visited each of those monuments one by one. Throughout this journey, I made some surprising discoveries—although the aliens did not leave any bones or hair, the markings engraved on the stones have not disappeared. In a secret chamber inside a volcano's ruins, I saw the record of an alien civilization written through the various carvings on the walls."

As he turned to this page, Roland was convinced that this was indeed a book created in the Dream World—he had never seen the black and white photos of the ancient buildings before his transmigration, and what was even more conspicuous was that the

volcanic remains that the martialist mentioned at the end looked eerily similar to the demons' Blackstone Pagoda!

"It was not a coincidence that they acquired the Force of Nature and then fought against humankind. This was like a meeting arranged by the deities, and they regarded defeating the adversaries as a repayment of the power bestowed upon them by the deities."

"I know that it is hard to describe the carving with words alone, but I could feel it—if humans could learn their language, then I think the most appropriate term would probably be the Battle of Divine Will."

What Lan was referring to... came from here?

Roland licked his slightly dry lips and continued reading.

"But this is not what I meant to focus on—if this power was granted just for a single war alone, then it would have ended a long time ago. No matter what the deities were, they would have no longer have had anything to do with mankind after that war. However, some things are worse than we thought. According to the writing on the sculptures... this was not the first time that they had done something like this."

The handwriting slowly became less tidy, as the number of ink dots and emotional words increased. It seemed as if the writer was hesitant about whether or not he should continue writing.

"These aliens did not live on the same planet as us from the very beginning. The outbreak of the war had brought about a drastic change in their home environment, though they were well-prepared for that change. It was not as simple as a forest degenerating into a desert, or a nomadic tribe progressing into a farming civilization step by step. Dammit, I don't know how to express this part of the concept. I can provide a less appropriate example. Such a change is like electrons jumping between energy levels in an atomic transition. Before the change, it was at a certain

stable level of energy. But then, the change happened, and it immediately gained energy, directly transitioning to a higher level, with no process or intermediate stage. It was like their civilization jumped to a higher level in the blink of an eye."

"Frankly speaking, I do not even want to imagine how many such changes they have already gone through. But now that they no longer exist, why does the Erosion and the Awakening still continue? Or does this mean that... the Battle of Divine Will had never ended in the first place?"

"The more I wonder about this question, the more I feel terrified. What kind of world are we living in? Are the Fallen Evil really martialists that have been tempted by power? I feel like I have been caught up in a vortex."

"If the answer is no, then what exactly are we facing?"

"The so-called gifts and rewards are all lies."

"The only difference has been the change in—"

The writing stopped abruptly and left only a long line of scratches behind. It seemed as if the author had suddenly lost all his strength and let the pen fall down.

"—Doesn't anyone know who the author is?"

"Why would it be written as unknown if the author were known? Apparently, the author died before he could finish writing the book, and the Association couldn't find any records regarding him."

As he recalled the previous conversation, Roland could not help but feel a chill rise from the soles of his feet.

It would be unnecessary to elaborate as the book had too many parts that were filled with a strange atmosphere—it was clearly recounting the Dream World, yet there was always a feeling of *deja vu*.

He could not wait to pull out the phone and call Garcia.

In any case, there were just too many questions in his mind that he needed Garcia to answer.

Just then, his elbow knocked aside the book, and a red note slipped out of it.

Roland was surprised for a second, after which he bent to pick it up.

He saw two rows of small print.

"When the divine meaning appears, meet at the appointed time."

"Rose Café, No. 302."

Chapter 969: Into the Abyss

"Ring... ring."

The phone got connected while he was still in a daze.

"Hello? Why are you calling again?" The voice on the other line seemed impatient. "If you have something to say, do it quickly. I'm going out soon."

Roland shook his head and forced himself to concentrate. "Ah, so... I've just read the book and its content is quite..."

"It's quite horrifying, right?" Garcia seemed to have guessed his reaction. "This is usually how most people behave when they see it for the first time. But since it's fictional, you will forget all about it after you've slept."

"Fictional?" Roland frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Literally." Laughter could be heard on the other end of the earpiece. "The Martialist Association investigated the volcanic ruins mentioned by the author, and discovered that it was engulfed by magma 200 years ago—that's an active volcano. Although it has never had a big eruption, it hasn't been completely dormant for thousands of years either. So unless he can replay the past or live for two centuries, while also being able to tolerate the high temperature and thick smoke, that author has been making stuff up."

Her reply really surprised him, and so he hesitated for a long time before saying, "In that case... he made up all the content in the book?"

"It could be true or false. Anyway, I've never had much interest in archeology. Master once said that if wasn't for the fact that the author was wearing the martialist robes and died in the Association's library, the book wouldn't even have been kept and recorded."

"But the association didn't know his identity..."

"So the author himself became more famous than the book for that reason. This could be considered an unsolved mystery of the Association. But I doubt you'll be able to solve it. According to my master, the management went through every nook and cranny of the records department, and still weren't able to discover anything." Garcia said, "Anyway, there're so many rumors about the book. Have you finished? I'm going to hang up now."

"Hang on, wait—" Roland said hurriedly, "After you brought the book this time... did you read it again?"

He actually wanted to ask about the note, but eventually changed his mind.

"I flipped through a few pages on the way back. What happened?"

"No, nothing... I just wanted to ask."

"Click." The line got cut off on the other end—apparently, this teasing question made Garcia lose her patience.

He could even hear the door closing over at apartment No. 0827, even though they were separated by two walls.

Roland could not help but sigh. If he was not direct, then this sort of question that he asked would only cause annoyance and nothing else.

Firstly, only half of the book "Raison d'être" was written, and the red note was most likely caught in the last few blank pages. There would be no guarantee that it would be noticed even if you were to read the entire book.

She had also taken the shuttle when she came back from the Association. He could easily imagine that she would not have had much time to go through the book seriously during her journey back.

Regardless of how Garcia answered, he would still not have been

able to judge whether she had seen this note.

No—it was a definite no.

According to Garcia's character, if she had seen it, she would certainly not be indifferent to it.

So it would seem that these two sentences were either a prank of some sort or a hidden message.

Roland could not help but wish that it was just a prank.

The other alternative was just... too absurd.

Who was the note for? Was it meant for anyone who discovered it, or did it have a specific target?

Rationally speaking, he was more inclined toward the latter—the book was not top-secret, and most of the martialists had already read it due to its fame. It would not be surprising if there was a reader who did not discover it, but it was very unlikely that it remained undiscovered even after so many people had read the book. So it was probable that the note was not placed in the book from the beginning, but rather it was put in there fairly recently.

But it was this logic that made him feel creeped out about the whole thing.

What did that imply?

It meant the Dream World, this fantasy world that was envisioned by him, had been discovered by someone. This was similar to being in a dream when a person in the dream suddenly turned around and smiled slyly at you.

Roland patted his cheek and tried to suppress the chill in his heart. He tried to repeatedly convince himself that there was nothing to be scared of. Although this was just speculation at the moment, even if it was true, as long as he left, this world's time would stop. Who could be in a position to threaten him?

Moreover, the message on the note only implied that they would

wait to be contacted instead of taking the initiative. This could help to explain some of the problems.

As for the location of the Rose Café and what the "divine meaning" meant, that would be best left to the Taquila witches to investigate.

He did not forget that he still had other things to do next.

He looked up at the wall clock and confirmed the time before taking the key that he had already prepared from his bedroom. He then locked up and went downstairs.

In order to explore the memory fragments of the tube-shaped apartment, Roland had already completed a lot of preparations ever since the arrival of the Taquila witches. For example, he made duplicates of the keys to every apartment and even bought an unlocking tool online—since he was the only person who could see this "non-existent" Gate of Memory, if he did encounter one that was locked, he would have no choice but to roll up his sleeves and do the work himself.

If it hadn't been for the expedition for the unification of Graycastle, this part of the investigation would have been completed a long time ago.

Roland went down to the fifth floor and found room No. 0510 quite quickly.

Most people would be taking a nap at this time. The late autumn sunshine made everyone feel lazy. The whole corridor looked quiet and serene, which was a stark contrast to the rush of traffic outside in the streets.

He inserted the key into the lock and turned it gently.

The door opened.

A weird aroma suddenly poured into his nose and made him involuntarily hold his breath.

Although the Dream World changed itself to accommodate the demon, it did not amend some of the details, such as body odor. In order to cover up their smell, the extensive use of perfume had become the last resort.

Roland spent two minutes thoroughly searching the room again. Once he confirmed that there was no one, he locked the door, remove the hydraulic bolt-cutter from his backpack, and walked straight to the storage room at the end of the walkway.

This iron door was one of the few that were locked.

Evidence had already proven that although the world connected behind the door was mysterious, the lock of the door still couldn't withstand the forces from a tool that utilized the laws of physics. A few seconds later, the lock was silently broken into two pieces.

He swallowed hard and pushed open the heavy door—

Roland was immediately attracted to the marvelous sight in front of his eyes.

He seemed to be standing on top of a bottomless cliff. The top of the cliff was circular. It was more than 10 km in length and he almost could not see the opposite side. This peculiar terrain was encircled by an extremely magnificent lake. However, the lake was not formed of water, but dazzling Red Mist!

The mist and the peak were hundreds of meters apart. If he looked down, it would look like a shining red crystal, like a thick and rich substance. If it was not for the occasional mist that rose from the bottom and ran straight up the gust of wind to form a "mist pillar" that stood over the horizon, it would be very hard to relate that to the dirty and dark "bloody fog".

Roland felt like he was standing on the surface of the sun and admiring the torrential solar flares, while he watched the haze that was thicker than the castle, appearing continuously and shining more brilliantly than molten steel. However, it did not radiate a

hot, unforgiving heat. As the height increased, the color of the fog quickly faded, and it finally diffused into the air to form a Red Mist layer.

And this was not all that he saw.

Towering black stone buildings surrounded the circular cliff—most of them were tower-shaped and differed only in some minor details. As the sun was shrouded in red mist, the whole world seemed particularly dim. Only when there were gushes of red mist at the bottom of the Red Mist Lake could these black towers be faintly seen reflected in the lake.

Like a dense stone forest.

Chapter 970: Demon City

"Is this... the city of the demons?"

Roland could not help but feel amazed. He thought the memory fragments would be connected to a certain decisive battlefield. He did not expect to have the opportunity to face the enemy's lair.

However, the scene in front of him had many differences from the mirage that was seen by the Witch Cooperation Association.

At least, he had taken a good look around but did not find that most prominent main tower which was the core—the giant Obelisk that was made using the mineral vein of the God's Stone and that could grow and create red Mist.

After all, there were too many towers here.

Some were even standing above the cliffs. Most of the towers leaned outward, just like apartments floating in the sky.

How did they manage to build such a magnificent complex?

And this was not the city complex that Leaf had seen, so where could that be?

Or could it have been located in a more distant place... for example, the rumored birthplace of the demons?

Just then, Roland noticed that there was a flash of light at the sinkhole near the Red Mist Lake.

Unlike the glittering mist, that seemed to be a natural burning flame.

He was a bit surprised to find that the Red Mist could burn since an open fire should have been banned in the city of the demons.

He decided to go down to the bottom of the pit to satisfy his curiosity—judging by the architectural style of the opening, he should be able to find the stairs leading down or a hanging basket nearby.

However, Roland suddenly stopped before even walking a hundred steps as all the muscles in his body started to tense up!

A team of demons actually walked out from around the corner!

Judging by their appearance, they should all be Mad Demons. They had bone armors and held short spears. The two in front even wore gloves, and their burly figures almost blocked half of his path.

The distance from the two of them was less than ten steps away!

"Wait a minute... How could there be living creatures in the memory fragments?"

He had never seen a knight from the Judgement Army nor a priest of the church when he was wandering in the Hermes Cathedral at home!

This accidental encounter left Roland a bit shocked, and unsure of how to react.

"Should I escape?"

He had seen the strength and precision of the Mad Demon's spear throwing skills, so running away from the enemy was undoubtedly a dead end.

Charge and overthrow them?

The Dream World's power was still running in his body, so his skills at the moment were stronger than those of ordinary people. However, compared with these bloodthirsty monsters, his fighting skills still remained at the level of street fighting. He could probably deal with an opponent one on one, but dealing with six Mad Demons? He felt that the odds of winning were very slim, especially against the leading Ironhand demon, as its powerful electric shock ability was definitely the nemesis of close combat.

However, before he could make a decision, something astonishing happened again.

The demons did not seem to realize the existence of the uninvited guest, and they walked straight past him without pausing.

Roland was stunned, then subconsciously turned around to touch one of the Mad Demon's arms.

His finger passed through its skin, but his fingertips did not feel anything as if he was touching a phantom.

"So... it's like this?"

He thoughtfully recovered his hand and bent over to touch the ground.

His palm could clearly feel the dampness of the black soil eroded by the Red Mist.

Roland had a faint idea of the answer.

It appeared that the devoured person's resistance would determine the extent of the memory fragments, and it could also affect what would be displayed in the scene—the content saved in this memory was obviously much more than that left by Zero.

If he thought along these lines, his mind naturally came up with two new doubts.

One was the question of the church warrior who deliberately sacrificed himself to save Zero. To what extent could his memory be enriched? Was it impossible to talk to the dead after entering the memory fragment?

And the next was Zero's level of resistance—how much hate and unwillingness did she have after being defeated by him? It was even stronger than that of the demon.

Suddenly, he had an urge to go back to the house and lift the little girl up to smack her butt.

Roland took a deep breath, put away his distracting thoughts and hastened his steps back to the destination.

...

Just as he expected, there were many ramps and stone steps leading to the pit at the edge of the circular cliff. Some of them were very spacious and did not lose to the main roads at Neverwinter.

The more he walked down, the more he was impressed about the size of the Red Mist Lake.

Even if the upper half of the Western Region's Great Snow Mountain was flattened, it would not be that wide. Standing on the cliff, he could not help but feel how small he was. He felt as if the whole world was far away from him, leaving only the turbulent red mist and the looming stone towers that could be seen on and off.

It was hard to imagine how this sinkhole could form naturally.

What was more incredible was that the demons had transformed this place to become their permanent residence.

How many hundreds of years would it take to dig this deep and even leave roads for carriage access as well as coat these roads with a hard black stone layer?

If this was a measure of the demon's technical level and social organizational skills, this meant they could be regarded as an extremely difficult enemy.

The humans today would not be able to win by chance. If they want to win the Battle of Divine Will, the Four Kingdoms will have to give it their all.

As he got closer to the flames, Roland noticed that there were more demons showing up on the roads.

Not all of them were armed. Most of them wore skins or robes, and their appearance and sizes were more varied. It was hard to imagine they were all of the same species.

As mentioned in Pasha's report, the Union had once captured some demons that had no magic power and were not combat

trained. But it was still not certain whether they were a part of the demons or a slave tribe enslaved by the demons.

However, Roland did not find any superior demons of a supervisory level around him. Their actions seemed completely spontaneous, which meant that the answer should be the former.

This division seemed to be more thorough than the division between witches and normal humans. They were not only differentiated by ability, but even their form had a complete change.

It was still not clear whether they were born from the same origin, or were born with different methods or parents, without a possibility of changing between the forms.

"Do the demons have masculine and feminine forms?"

"Or, was their reproduction completely different from that of mankind and therefore could not be generalized?"

Armed with these thoughts, Roland finally arrived at the bottom of the sinkhole.

He discovered that the source of the fire came from a bonfire—he could see a stone bridge hanging on the side of the cliff, that was connected to a circular island.

Although it was an island, there was no support below, and it seemed like it was supported directly by the slender stone bridge. It looked so unstable that you would worry that it might fall at any time. The bonfire was set up around the island. When the mist soared, the top of the flame would burn brightly, as if it were echoing the roar of the mist lake. Sometimes the flame would rise up to 10 meters in height, and that was why Roland noticed the blinking below.

It seemed that although the Red Mist could burn, it was not something that would burn instantly.

In the vicinity, there were at least tens of thousands of demons.

They densely occupied all the ramps on the rock walls, platforms, and caves. Colored pennants were flying up and down in the wild wind, and the unidentified howls almost covered the roar of the air flow in the hole.

Roland blinked his eyes in shock.

"Were the demons... carrying out a ceremony?"

Chapter 971: A Frightful Experience in a Demon's Memory

Hearing the prolonged blast of a horn, all the demons fell into silence simultaneously. The Red Mist which looked like a crystal a moment ago started to surge like boiling lava inside the gigantic sinkhole.

Two demons stepped out of the crowd and walked on the slender stone bridge.

Roland found that one of them was clearly a Mad Demon whilst the other looked like the Lord of Hell Agatha mentioned.

Though the former was the biggest Mad Demon he had ever seen, it looked mediocre in front of the giant crawler shaped Lord of Hell.

Neither of them wore armor, however, the relationship between them was obviously confrontational. They were pushing each other all the way to the island.

Seeing this situation, the demons around the island did not show even the slightest surprise. Instead, they all seemed very excited.

What're they doing? Is it a duel?

Roland guessed that it was a kind of ceremonial battle which most barbarian races enjoyed. It was a duel to the death and a show of strength. The one who survived in the end would be venerated as a hero.

He despised such duels. It was not because of racial prejudice, he just thought that it had no meaning except providing the audience with an exciting fighting show. Besides, it may cause the race more harm than benefit. People on Earth also enjoyed these kinds of shows long ago. The only difference was that they usually watched some slave fighting a wild animal. Thus, no matter which party died, they would not feel sad.

As the only human being here, Roland did not care about the demons in the duel at all. Instead, he decided to take a closer look at this fierce battle. To the demons, he was now intangible and invisible like a ghost. Given that, he walked directly through the crowd and followed the two demons to the stone bridge.

When he got onto the island which was as large as Neverwinter's square, he found that someone was already there.

His eyes widened in surprise when he saw the creature clearly.

It seemed to be a female demon!

He was not sure about this impression at first, but he could not deny that it resembled a woman in many ways.

Besides, she looked quite attractive.

Wait, it's not scientific at all!

He became alert.

"How can an alien species who are completely incompatible with mankind produce an individual who's so much like a woman! It's reasonable that some of them may have evolved to walk upright since height would give predators a better view and a practical advantage in hunting. However, it's really hard to believe that this extent of similarity was purely coincidental."

On second thought, he believed that other people would hardly agree with him that this female demon was attractive. She had livid skin, prominent horns, an extra eye on the forehead and bony spurs all over her shoulders and arms. Different from a time traveler with wide experience like Roland, they would probably be terrified by her appearance.

Before the duel, the two demons bowed to the female demon who wore a white robe before moving to either side of the island to take up their positions. They stood close to the edge of the island, facing the Red Mist Lake solemnly.

The female demon walked slowly to the island's edge and began to sing a soprano.

The lake vigorously rippled as if something was about to come out.

Roland wondered, "Maybe, it wasn't just a duel, or maybe these two demons weren't dueling at all..."

Suddenly, two stout tentacles popped out of the lake. They swung respectively at the Mad Demon and the Lord of Hell. It looked like they were going to crush the demons at any minute, but surprisingly, both of the demons raised their arms as if they had willingly given up resistance.

The female demon shouted out, causing the tentacles to reluctantly stop above each demon's head. They wiggled for a moment before each spitting out some mucus and a crystal gemstone.

The demons used their fingers to rip open their chests before inserting the gemstones into their bodies without the slightest hesitation.

Instantly, a strong light radiated from their bodies, making it difficult for Roland to open his eyes.

His heart sank.

"Are those magic stones? Is that how the demon warriors get their supernatural power?"

"No, it can't be. Mad Demons are just common soldiers. There are thousands of them in the demon army. How could the demon city afford to hold a grand ceremony like this to convert each Mad Demon?"

A few minutes later, the blinding light gradually subsided, revealing a shocking scene.

The mighty Lord of Hell curled into a ball under tremendous

pain. All the spiracles on its back opened as it continuously leaked white fog. It seemed as if its body was melting.

The Mad Demon appeared to be much better compared to the Lord of Hell. Although its body also shrank after absorbing the Magic Stone, Roland believed that this was just a common side effect. Its arms and legs were not as stout as before and distinct blue veins appeared from the wound on its chest. It looked miserable, however, at least it was still able to stand.

Looking at the two demons, Roland could not help thinking of the incarnation ceremony of the God's Punishment Army.

"Do demon warriors also need to sacrifice their lives to get magic power?"

The next moment, the Lord of Hell issued a piercing cry. It lifted its upper body and sprang towards the female demon on the island.

With a loud bang, the entire floating island trembled.

Roland thought that he was going to see a crushed body under the Lord of Hell, but to his surprise, there were only a few shattered stones instead.

The Lord of Hell had missed its target. It got irritated and shifted its red eyes to the Mad Demon combatively.

"That's it."

"I've understood why they acted this way."

"A demon won't die after absorbing a Magic Stone, instead, it'll change. The Lord of Hell, who was an intelligent lifeform a moment ago, now looked more like a crawler and behaved as if it was an irrational beast."

The Mad Demon did not flinch at all. It fought the giant crawler fanatically!

After absorbing the magic stone, it seemed to obtain a new ability along with a smaller and agiler body!

The seemingly powerful four-legged crawler was forced to retreat by the Mad Demon. The hot steam it emitted could only damage a corner of the Mad Demon's garment whilst the Mad Demon's waves of black light were able to easily cut the Crawler's body. Roland could see the crawler's bones from its open wounds.

In less than five minutes, the duel was drawing to an end.

The Mad Demon tore off the crawler's tail. It quickly peeled the skin and flesh off the tailbone before throwing it back to the dying crawler to give a decisive blow!

The bone pierced the Lord of Hell's head and killed it. The whole process was as fast as lightning.

Roland who was standing by watching the whole duel, now looked grave. He noticed that the Mad Demon's arm did not wither after throwing the tailbone.

The frenzied Mad Demon walked step by step to the dead crawler. It grabbed the magic stone from the Crawler's dead body and swallowed it along with the flesh and blood adhering to the surface.

The audience suddenly burst into exclamation!

The female demon somehow appeared on the island again before Roland realized. She seemed to raise her eyebrows in surprise.

Once again, the Mad Demon revealed a painful expression as steam discharged from its nostrils and ears... Roland clearly saw that it was grinning. It seemed to be enjoying this torment very much.

This time, the converting process was much longer. It did not gradually recover until roughly half an hour later. Tearing off its old blister covered skin, it revealed a completely different appearance.

Roland could not help gasping at its new figure.

Its face now resembled a human being's.

Seeing this, the audience all cheered simultaneously.

"Charita!"

Roland did not know who called out this word first, but quickly, all the demons followed and repeatedly chanted together!

"Charita!"

"Charita!"

"Charita!"

Hearing the reverberating roar of the demons, Roland's heart further sank.

He thought of the rumor Pasha mentioned.

"The rumor was that, long before the beginning of the first Battle of Divine Will, someone had got in contact with the demons."

"That person had taught knowledge to the demons, who were no different from beasts."

"This might be the reason why Senior Demons looked more and more like humans."

Chapter 972: Going to War

After leaving the Dream World, Roland still felt the cold on his back.

Nightingale was bending over the desk while chewing snacks. Seeing him wake up, she instantly dashed to the couch and asked, "Are you all right? Is there anything wrong in that world?"

He felt relieved seeing the concerned look on a familiar face. It reminded him that he had already left the dreadful alien world. He exhaled and forced a smile before replying, "No. I just had some new discoveries."

She looked at him incredulously. "Really? You look pale." She touched his forehead before adding, "Look... you're even sweating."

Hearing that, Roland realized that the coldness on his back was due to his sweaty shirt.

"You know I didn't lie. It was just a dream after all."

But now, he was not as confident about this statement. The Dream World had become increasingly complicated and more like a real world.

"I don't know," said Nightingale. Her mouth twitched.

"What?" said Roland in surprise.

"I need to use my ability to discern the truth from a lie," she said with her hands laid out. "Now, you're not just the king of Graycastle but also the leader of the ancient witches of Taquila as well as Sleeping Spell. Even the Kingdom of Dawn is under your control. You aren't an ordinary lord anymore and will naturally have more and more secrets in the future. If I knew everything about you... you wouldn't feel comfortable around me anymore..." She paused. "You wouldn't like a person who could always look through, would you?"

Nightingale turned her head away to evade his eyes. Looking at her, he could not help but chuckle. All his mental stress had disappeared.

He was well aware of what she thought.

Most lords did not want their followers or servants to know too much about themselves. They usually liked to adopt an ambiguous attitude and enjoyed being a little unpredictable. If a person knew the lord they served too well, they would often not meet a nice end. Though Nightingale was aware that Roland was not such a cruel lord, she was still afraid that he would alienate himself from her when his power increased.

"What's so funny?" she asked whilst feeling aggrieved. After having several bites of her dried fish, she added, "I was really worried about you getting into trouble in that world."

"Ahem." Roland stopped laughing and with a straight face said, "Indeed, nobody wants other people to peer into their mind, not to mention a powerful ruler." He paused deliberately before continuing. "But you aren't included in 'these other people.'"

Roland did not want to become a real feudal king.

Having read about the ups and downs of many dynasties in history, he was sure of what he really wanted presently.

He needed a group of truly trustworthy people to help him accomplish this grand undertaking.

"What?" exclaimed the startled Nightingale.

"If you hadn't come to Border Town, I would've been killed by the maid assassin sent by Garcia long ago," explained Roland slowly. "When the Battle of Divine Will starts, the situation will become even more dangerous for me. Besides, some people in the kingdom still think of me as their enemy. You're going to be very busy and I'll be heavily relying on you. How could I not treat you differently?"

Roland found that he sometimes really liked the simple-minded people of this world. If he said this to a girl in the world he previously lived, she would probably roll her eyes and think that he was just trying to deceive her with sweet words.

"Besides, the most terrible lie isn't some plausible statement I may use to deceive others, but a lie I tell myself. With you around, I'll never have to worry about this problem."

Nightingale tilted her head and muttered, "I can't stop you from deceiving yourself."

"Of course you can. You're able to determine the credibility of a statement, aren't you? Like, 30% of a statement wasn't accurate or reliable, or alternatively, the whole statement was a downright lie."

"Well, yes, I can do that based on the feedback from my magic power."

"Then, when I announce a decision I'm unsure of, you can confirm if it's correct regardless of how confident I appear to be. Deluding myself into making a wrong decision will do more harm than being uncertain about it. When you notice me deceiving myself, you can give me hints. This stops me from making irreversible mistakes," said Roland with his hands laid out. "Now do you see how important your job is?"

"In that case... I'll ask you the same question again, but this time I'll use my ability," said Nightingale after a moment of silence.

"Please," said Roland as he gestured her to continue.

"Are you really alright?" asked Nightingale.

"So, the first thing she wants to confirm is still my safety..." Roland thought to himself.

"I really am fine," he replied with a smile.

After hearing that, Nightingale finally put her mind at ease.

"What are the new discoveries you mentioned?"

"I'm going to tell the commanders of the united front about that now." He stood up and walked to his desk, picking up the phone which linked his office to Third Border City, before announcing, "I've seen a demon's memory fragment in the Dream World."

...

"That's what I've seen." Roland described his entire experience in the Dream World. He excluded the book of the Martialist Association and the message on the red note. "What do you think of it?" he asked.

Pasha who had already appeared on the light curtain was the first one to answer his question. "It's of great importance, Your Majesty. No one has ever returned alive from the city of demons before. You are the first one to do so, even though it was just a dream experience."

"With this experience alone, you would be eligible to meet the Three Chiefs of the Union in person," said Alethea. She rarely had a positive attitude toward Roland but this time she sounded exceptionally excited. "The demons increase their power by absorbing Magic Stones. This explains many things that had baffled us before!"

"Yes, given that a Mad Demon can acquire a new ability and evolve by taking in a Magic Stone, we can speculate that a Senior Demon is likely also created this way. It wasn't born a Senior Demon. To become such a powerful creature, it has to strengthen its power by absorbing a certain amount of Magic Stones. This explains why Senior Demons are able to have so many kinds of abilities," explained Celine, who studied magic power deeply.

"I've got a question," said Tilly, the leader of Sleeping Spell. "Is there a limit on this power strengthening process?"

Her question made everyone in the meeting fall into silence.

After a long time, Celine replied, "I'm afraid that there isn't a limit."

"Does that mean a demon may grow even stronger than a Transcendent?" asked Wendy with a frown.

"Witches and demons can't be directly compared like that," said Celine as she shook her main tentacle. "Do you still remember the words left by the underground civilization? If our magic power keeps increasing, we'll become indefinitely close to the deities one day. Thus, as long as we keep manipulating our magic power, our understanding will grow and our abilities will enhance, allowing us to evolve without limit. This rule applies equally to witches, demons and the underground civilization. Fortunately, it's not an easy journey. Getting close to the deities is hard, so don't worry too much."

Celine continued, "I reckon that this is very good news for us. If demons were born with various abilities, they would have a large number of Senior Demons now since they could reproduce countlessly in the past 400 years. Fortunately, we're now aware that they also rely on chances to evolve. Furthermore, based on His Majesty's description, their evolution isn't easily accomplished. Otherwise, the demons wouldn't react so enthusiastically to the Mad Demon's success."

"It's indeed impressive. Celine was able to get so much information from the scene I described. She has undeniably devoted her whole life to fighting demons." Roland exclaimed in his heart.

"After hearing your story, I'm even more worried about the rumor," said Pasha to Roland using mind communication. "Your discovery, to some extent, has already confirmed it, which makes me feel very uneasy. Why did the person help the demons? I guess that means Battles of Divine Will may not be as simple as we think."

Roland replied through the mind connection, "I agree with you. But no matter what, we can't change things that have happened in the past. All we can do now is fight to the death."

After a while, Pasha exclaimed, "Your willpower is exceptionally strong, Your Majesty. We underestimated you and thought of you as an ordinary man in the past. I have to admit that we were wrong about you."

Roland smiled without saying anything. In fact, he had not been so determined at the very beginning.

Six days later, the vanguard units of the First Army entered the demons' scouting area.

Roland received a report from the front line.

"Sylvie reported that she found a group of Devilbeasts flying toward the First Army." Nightingale repeated what she had just heard to Roland whilst holding a Sigil of Listening in her hand.

Roland decided to eliminate them as a prelude to the Battle of Divine Will. He nodded and said, "Tell them to act according to the plan."

Chapter 973: Combat Beyond Visible Range (Part I)

The sniper team was moving across the Fertile Plains, to the north of the Western Region.

Guided by Sylvie, they quickly reached their assigned position, in a grove of trees, far away from First Army's position.

According to the General Staff's plan, they would take care of any enemies within five kilometers in order to protect First Army without being spotted. Given that, the team had to stay away from the army, in case that some Devilbeasts spotted the soldiers on the plains when the weather was clear.

After all, there were more than 1,000 soldiers in the army. When moving across the plain, it was easy to notice them, even from 10 kilometers away.

When the sniper team set out, the First Army soldiers stopped marching and camouflaged themselves.

The sniper team included multiple witches to ensure its agility and flexibility. Lightning and Maggie formed the Flight Squad and the other witches were in the Ark Squad. They would work together to confuse and eliminate enemies to cover the movement of the First Army. All the soldiers were dressed in special camouflage uniforms which were called "jungle camouflage". They were dyed with strange colors and made from special materials.

Lightning and Maggie highly praised the camouflage uniforms. According to them, when they looked down from the sky, they could not easily discern the soldiers and after the soldiers stopped moving, they seemed to disappear.

Andrea also wore such a uniform.

But she did not like it at all.

It was not well tailored and completely without a fitted shape. Wearing such clothes, everyone looked the same. The brown and green color seemed to be daubed on the uniform casually and its fabric was as rough as the bark of a tree. If it had not been for the special lining made by Soloya, her skin would have been scratched by the uniform. She wondered where His Majesty found this crudely made material.

However, she would never complain about it no matter how much she hated it. As a noble lady, she had to remain elegant in all circumstances and more importantly, she did not want to give Ashes a chance to mock her.

"She'll tease me mercilessly about being picky and say that I'm still too fragile. She'll argue that my trip to the Kingdom of Dawn must have fed my arrogance. I can clearly predict what she's going to say and how she's going to say it."

"I was the one who made a vital contribution to our success in subduing the Kingdom of Dawn. While I was fighting, she was just lounging around Lady Tilly doing nothing."

Sylvie's voice interrupted Andrea's thought. "The demons are only 35 kilometers away from us. We must get ready. Let's rise to the ground."

"Roger, going up now. The barrier will be lifted in five seconds. Please watch out for the impact," Margie replied.

"Oh, yeah. That's the tone I like!" Lightning shook her fists excitedly and said. "You sound so professional. What a fast learner you are."

"Did I? Thank you." Margie touched her head bashfully. She might have never heard such a praise back in the church.

Andrea could not help holding her head and thought, "How come such a cool, crisp tone sounds professional? And where's the impact? When the ark disappeared, we just shook a little before

standing firmly on the ground because of our inertia. This kind of impact can't even compete with the effect caused by Ashes' roars."

"Now it's time for the Flight Squad to get ready." Lightning gave everyone a thumbs up, put on her goggles, and then leaped up. "The runway has been cleared. The green light is on. Lightning, taking off!"

"Maggie, taking off!" With these words, Maggie transformed into a goshawk and followed Lightning. They soon disappeared into the clouds.

"What's a runway? Some road specially built for running?" Amy looked around, feeling puzzled. "Where's the green light?"

"They probably learned these terms during their new training," Phyllis who came to protect the Ark Squad tilted her head and said. "I've heard His Majesty say them in the castle. They may be some technical words or expressions for flight training. However, besides the girls, I also saw Wendy and Anna during the training. It's a little strange."

"What? Does that mean witches without flying ability could also learn to fly?"

"I don't know."

"If I can learn it, what should I say to announce that I'm going to fly up?" Amy touched her chin and said. "How about... Amy, healing magic?"

"I like the term you created." Sharon's eyes shone with excitement. "Come on, make up a term for me!"

"Hey, be quiet. Don't disturb Miss Sylvie. She's tracking the enemies." Phyllis said smilingly.

"Got it!"

Watching the girls, Andrea could not help sighing. According to the plan, in the following week, they would get farther and farther

away from the main force of the First Army. As an isolated team, they would advance toward the northwest to mislead the demons. As they penetrated deeper into the demons' territory, they could only rely on their own strength to evade or defeat their enemies.

It was going to be a hard journey for the sniper team. Andrea could hardly understand why the girls seemed so happy and relaxed.

Suddenly, someone patted her shoulder, she turned around and saw Iffy who showed her an "I understand you" look.

She felt comforted by this.

"We've no choice... because combat beyond normal visual range consumes a huge amount of magic power, we have to bring many assistant witches, such as Amy and Sharon, to provide us with magic power. This is the only way we can shoot continuously."

At this moment, she was really impressed by Countess Spear, who remained silent this whole time and looked more peaceful than her. She admired the way this great, noble lady dealt with the situation.

"Let's get started." Andrea took a deep breath and said. "The demons will enter our range any minute."

"Wait a second," Spear suddenly whispered. "I'm old and feel a little sick after traveling by the ark."

Andrea was speechless.

Fortunately, she did not have to exert much efforts to set up the anti-Devilbeast sniper rifle. Roland had minimized the installation steps by dividing the weapon into two parts, the gun and the tripod. Ashes and Phyllis had carried them the entire journey.

Andrea quickly got the rifle set up. She found that this sniper rifle without a scope turned out to be easier to operate when compared to a bolt rifle she had used before. She inserted a palm-sized bullet into the chamber of the rifle and nodded to Camilla Dary.

Camilla closed her eyes and extended her hands to touch Andrea and Sylvie.

Instantly, Andrea saw the world differently. Everything within her sight was distorted. She felt as if her soul was pulled out of her body, or another soul squeezed into her's. This weird change always made her feel a little dizzy, but after repeated training, she was able to get used to it and managed to quickly focus on targets that were far away.

Sylvie immediately sensed what she wanted.

The next moment, Andrea could see the world through Sylvie's eyes. The trees and grassland were instantly replaced by a sea of white clouds.

And she saw three black dots flying in the sky.

Chapter 974: Combat Beyond Visible Range (Part II)

"How far away is the target?"

"Twelve kilometers."

"What about the other directions?"

"Clear."

Sylvie was able to answer Andrea's questions in an instant, which made Andrea feel like talking to herself, since the Mind Resonance greatly improved their communication efficiency.

Although Andrea felt weird in the beginning, she really enjoyed this experience now. After her mind was connected to Sylvie's, she felt as if everything in the world suddenly sprang to life. This connection not only enabled her to see far across the world, but also enhanced all her senses. It was a wonderful feeling.

She could not help wondering how she would feel if she was in a Mind Resonance state with Princess Tilly.

"This is Flight Squad. Lightning speaking. Ark Squad, can you see me?" Lightning's voice came through a Sigil of Listening.

Andrea stopped wondering and concentrated on the task again. She searched in the sky and said, "I see you."

"Is it alright for us to stay at this height?"

"Yes. You'd better hide behind some clouds."

"Got it."

"Coo."

When Andrea missed a target or did not have enough power to shoot a demon, Lightning and Maggie, who hid above the enemy, would swoop down to take care of it. When Lightning flew at her full speed, she was three times faster than a Devilbeast, and Maggie

could quickly transform into a beast. Under such circumstances, it would be impossible for the enemy to defend against an overhead attack.

But Lightning and Maggie were only able to launch one attack like that.

If there was more than one demon, they would have to retreat.

Personally, Andrea did not want to give the little girls any chance to fight.

She had absolute confidence in her own ability.

She boasted of being an unerring marksman. Even Ashes could not match her in this respect.

She wanted to show these little girls what a real professional was like.

"Six kilometers."

Sylvie warned her again.

"Good, I've locked onto the first target."

Andrea closed her eyes and focused her mind on her target.

In theory, she could shoot down any target she saw within the weapon's range, which was longer than five kilometers, but the amount of magic power required made it impossible for her to do so.

Once she exhausted all her magic power, she would pass out.

After repeated testing, she found that five kilometers was the ideal distance.

As she was tracking her target, a rush of magic power flowed out of her body and wrapped her tightly. She quickly saw a targeting line stretch to the Devilbeast, who was completely unaware of the impending attack.

This slender, silver line was so distorted that it looked nothing

like a bullet's trajectory. The first stretch looked like an arched bridge stretching far across the empty sky and then it became a wavy line.

She had never seen any targeting line like this before she got this new rifle. It was a connected sequence of irregular line segments. It kept changing all the time and the middle part of it seemed like a spider silk thread waving in the wind, but the end of it was always fixed to her target.

She had asked His Majesty about this mysterious targeting line and his answer was totally beyond her expectation.

According to him, her ability was not about aiming. No matter how carefully a sniper aimed his weapon at a target, he could never predict whether he could hit it when he fired. Once a bullet was shot, its speed would decrease as it flew and the external environment's influence on it would increase. A strong cross wind was enough to make the bullet hit far away from its target. Even with the aid of the best scope, a sniper could never guarantee that he would be able to make each shot hit the target.

And when the target was five kilometers away, a normal sniper would have great difficulty hitting it.

"So, what's my ability?" She had asked Roland at that time.

Back then, she thought he seemed to have been bluffing and waiting for her to ask such a question, but she didn't mind it. "Actually, you're good at a coin toss. Many factors determine where a bullet will land, but surprisingly, you can always hit your target. Why? Think about this. If you toss a coin into the air, you somehow know which side it will land on. That's why you can always be sure that a bullet you shoot out will hit your target."

"Are you sure? How come I never get what I want when I'm playing cards?"

"Well, they aren't the same thing. Do you wish to get stronger?"

There's a theory that may greatly increase your ability."

"Really? What's it?"

His Majesty had replied smilingly, "Probability Theory."

"From the viewpoint of conditional probability, many different factors can affect your shooting results, but you're able to control or remove the effect of these conditions. Trust me, you'll have unlimited potential as long as you can master this theory." Andrea still clearly remembered that His Majesty had handed her the book with a smile on his face.

During that moment, she had been thrilled as if she could see a smooth road to a bright future and had thought excitedly, "I'm going to be a Transcendent."

However, this excitement had only lasted until that night.

She had opened the book, "Probability Theory", and failed to understand anything in it.

What the hell is this? Normal people could never understand this book!

"Crack—"

Andrea pulled the trigger when the silver guiding line dissolved into the background.

With a flash flames, the shot rang out. It was much louder than a bolt rifle. The sound wave was so strong that she felt as if it had hammered her chest and the heavy recoil kicked her shoulder. Thanks to the impact-resistance coatings on the stock and the cushioned tripod, she didn't experience a severe impact from the recoil. Before the dust settled, she was ready for a second shot.

A flow of magic power poured into her body.

The witches acted according to their training. Besides Margie and the witches assisting Andrea, all the witches, including the combat witches who came to protect everyone, would provide magic

power for Andrea.

"What happened? Did you hit it?" Everyone asked with concern.

After all, the first shot was the key to determining the success or failure of this operation.

"The bullet has a long distance to travel, but it won't miss the target" said Andrea, confidently.

That's it, just as His Majesty said.

I've already known how the coin will land.

The bullet was traveling at such a high speed that even Sylvie was unable to track it, but Andrea could clearly describe its trajectory. After flying four kilometers, it would start to drop toward the ground. Although a stray bullet was still fast and lethal, it would miss the target if it continued to travel like that.

However, a strong gust of wind would change everything. She felt that it was like skipping a stone on water. When her bullet hit the wind, it would begin to ascend like a bird riding on the wind and would make an arc across the sky. This was the only way the bullet could avoid the two devilbeasts flying in the front of the formation and hit the last one in line.

Andrea pulled the trigger again, but this time, she did not hurry to prepare for the third shot. Instead, she turned her gaze toward her first target, the devilbeast at the back of the formation.

"Bang," She whispered.

The next moment, the devilbeast shook violently, a cloud of blood erupted from it back, and its organs began to fall out of its broken body. The demon on its back was torn into two parts. Its upper body was thrown high and red mist began spraying out from the tanks they were carrying.

From a distance, it looked a red flower blooming in the sky.

Chapter 975: A Night in the Wild

If the demon flying at the forefront noticed what happened behind, it would have been able to escape. Although Andrea could easily shoot down a floating balloon from the air during previous live-fire drills, she noticed that it was much harder to predict the movements of a living being.

Once she pulled the trigger, the bullet would dart toward a definite position. She could not control the situation if the target left that position on its own. Thus, if a living being became aware of the danger and suddenly decided to change its path, her bullet would most likely miss the target.

She never missed a close target and always knew the result shortly after an attack was launched. Now, however, she needed to wait patiently for the result as the bullet had to travel five kilometers to hit its target.

She could determine which side a coin would land on when it was tossed onto a table, but she could not glue them down to ensure the result. If someone suddenly tapped the table or flicked the coin with a finger as it landed, it could still cause the coin to flip to the opposite side. Thus, she would not feel surprised if the demon escaped.

If it did try to escape, the Flight Squad would swoop down to take care of it.

Fortunately, the demon did not notice anything unusual.

It was not because the demon was not vigilant enough. By flying hundreds of meters above the ground, it could hardly hear anything except the wind whistling. Additionally, as it flew facing the wind, this whistling would be further amplified. When they had started to prepare this combat plan, Lightning had concluded from repeated testing that as long as the demon was flying 10 meters ahead of the target, it would not hear anything when a

bullet went through the target behind it.

That was why Andrea chose to shoot down the demon flying at the end of the row first.

The big bullet left an opening in its belly and completely destroyed its inner organs. After they fell out of its body, it could not even make a scream.

Given that, the demon flying in the front did not notice anything abnormal and thus missed its only opportunity to escape.

After a dozen seconds, another bullet came from above and shot into its chest, passing through its body before breaking the spine of the mount below.

The devilbeast who flew in the middle carrying a pack on its back now noticed something was wrong, but it was not intelligent enough to understand the current situation. Driven by its instincts for survival, it turned around and flew toward Taquila.

Andrea locked onto it.

She foretold the coin's face for the third time.

...

In the late afternoon, the Ark rose from the ground again.

According to the map drawn by the Exploration Group, the sniper team had safely arrived at their resting place below a cave which had naturally collapsed.

"There are dried bird beak mushrooms?" asked Amy with great surprise.

"I stored them here," said Maggie as she dug out several glass bottles under a stone. "We even have barbecue seasonings here!"

"Do you prepare these things at all your bases?" asked Amy.

"Of course," Lightning replied proudly. "This place is poorly-equipped compared to the other bases. If we were at Forest

Pavilion now, we'd be able to hold a banquet with the amount of food we've stored there!"

"Forest Pavilion?" Sharon asked whilst intrigued, "Where's it at?"

"It's near the Impassable Mountain Range in a big tree that's as large as a castle," said Maggie while drawing an invisible outline in the air. "We asked Leaf to build a roof and a sunning ground to dry our jerky."

"I'm afraid that only His Majesty Roland can tolerate you stealing his salt and spices." Countess Spear rubbed her forehead. "I estimate that these seasonings cost several gold royals. If you do this to any other lord, he'll definitely throw you into a boiling wok."

Chief Butler of Sleeping Island nodded in agreement

"I didn't steal them!" Maggie retorted. "I just picked them up from the ground."

"You picked them up?" Spear asked doubtfully.

"They leaked from the buckets in the kitchen. I just collected them," said Lightning.

"And I didn't take them without paying," Lightning added. "In the Fjords, any explorer can earn lots of money by drawing maps, and I've drawn many maps for His Majesty."

"Well, His Majesty would never blame you even if you ransacked the kitchen." Sylvie interrupted in a weak voice. "Collecting some spices from the kitchen is nothing. I've seen Nightingale sneak into the kitchen six times a week to take all the dried fish. She has even broken into His Majesty's study to steal... "

Everybody looked grave now.

"To steal what?"

Sylvie realized that she had spilled the beans. "Ah, no, nothing... I'm just starving. Let's get ready to cook!"

After that, Andrea said something to quickly dispelled everybody's curiosity.

"By the way... Do you really want to pry into Nightingale's private life?"

All the witches immediately gave up the thought and began to find something to occupy themselves.

Sharon went to make a fire with her electric sparks. Amy swiftly chopped mushrooms. Phyllis and Ashes caught a boar for dinner. Spear Passi remained as she still felt sick... After a while, the tantalizing smell of food spread throughout the cave.

Unlike a banquet in the castle, there were not many dishes in this dinner, but their food tonight was delicious enough for a meal in the wilderness. Most of the time, when in the wild, they could only eat pancakes and jerky.

Ashes fried the boar's belly and sprinkled the grease from the pork onto the frizzled mushroom and meat. Seeing that, everyone's mouth kept watering.

In the end, they ate up the whole boar.

After their stomachs were full, the witches quickly fell asleep, except for the Extraordinary and the God's Punishment Witch. They were more energetic than the others and would keep watch during the night.

"I'll be on watch for the first half of the night," said Ashes as she added some wood to the fire. "Her Highness Tilly told me that you are more vulnerable to the effects of lack of sleep, although your sleep time is shorter than ours."

"That's true. Sleep deprivation will make it hard for us to control our bodies," Phyllis admitted. "But it's still early, I'll go to sleep later."

Ashes nodded and stopped talking. She was not talkative. Even in front of Tilly, she was mostly just a good listener.

Now, all was quiet except for the sputtering fire and the breathing noises of the witches.

"They're so close," whispered Phyllis whilst looking at the sleeping girls beside her. "I've never seen such a tight-knit team like them, even in the Taquila age."

Ashes looked to the side and saw Lightning lay sprawling on an animal skin and Maggie lay huddled up on her belly. The little girl's white hair tumbled down and covered both of them like a quilt which looked very warm.

She could not help but smile. "She wasn't like that in the beginning. Before we took her in, she had lived alone as a pigeon for several years. Back then, she almost lost the ability to speak, not to mention being close to someone. At that time, she would be alarmed by even the slightest rattling."

"Just, I don't know how long such intimacy between them will last..." Phyllis dropped her eyelids. "I hope this time the Battle of Divine Will will be different."

"Why do you say that?" asked Ashes with her eyebrows raised. She did not want to make this conversation sound like an interrogation, but she just could not suppress the question. "Faced with a common enemy, we'll all stick together, won't we?"

"Yes, we will," said Phyllis with a sigh. "But the war is also going to change the witches. Haven't you noticed that magic power affects more than just our ability?"

Chapter 976: The Way to Transcendence

"Magic affecting more than just our abilities?" Ashes was surprised.

"Yes, magic affects many aspects. For instance it allows our body to be more flexible. We can also heal wounds many times faster than a common person and in general live healthier," Phyllis said slowly. "Our temperament is also changed."

"Wait, what do you mean by temperament?"

"As we witches use magic, our desires are amplified in the moment. This changes who we are. For example, that feeling of vengeance as you see your friend cut down. An experience like this can scar witches and they would become indifferent, or even ruthless," Phyllis said, her eyes fixed on the flickering flames. "For a warrior, this type of mental state is indeed advantageous... but it also turns her into..."

"...Into what?" Ashes felt uneasy.

"A monster."

Ashes stepped back and almost tripped.

Ashes recalled her past... There's nothing else she would've done, she killed countless church members. Ashes remembered how she hacked person after person, her mind became stained with blood, transforming her into an uncontrollable killer. She felt like she had infinite power in this bloodlusted state. However looking back... she was just an empty husk, devoid of feeling any real emotion. It's only after she met Princess Tilly that she regained her humanity.

"Of course, that's not the case for all witches. It's only a trend. When faced with war, all people could care about is surviving. The long and hopeless period of resistance could even drive the common people mad. We're kind of fortunate that we can at least

use our desperation to turn into fearless berserkers," Phyllis paused. "even if you find it hard to understand the events that happened during the Union, our methods make sense. Without firm determination, the Three Chiefs couldn't be Transcendents."

"I see..." The campfire swayed a little as Ashes poked it. "If the Battle of Divine Will lasts forever, what will happen to the witches?"

"No one knows. Maybe they'll even look different," Phyllis said lightly. "After all, the witches' beauty was judged by their facial features. If they become inhuman, they may look strange, like the way the demons look."

The flames flickered again. For a moment, silence loomed over the cave.

After several moments pass, the God Punishment Witch said, "Do you have a reason why you fight the demons?"

Phyllis gave her own answer first after thinking that Ashes is hesitating. "Our reason is simple. We want to defeat the demons, win the war, and regain the glory of Taquila. Only with this faith in our heart could we last out until this day."

"You want to rebuild Taquila?"

"Of course, this place means much more than just a holy city to us, we're willing to devote our lives if that is what it takes to rebuild. However if King Roland manages to vanquish the demons, then the path he has chosen proves he's more capable than the Three chiefs. If the cooperation between the witches and the common people can give a promising future, we certainly have no objection."

Ashes kept quiet for a moment before she replied, "I just want to protect a certain person dear to me. Help her in any way I can. If she wants to throw demons out of the Land of Dawn, I will do that for her."

"I see..." Phyllis said and then shook her head. "Please forgive me but, that's not a good faith to hold when fighting enemies."

"Why is that?"

"Because it's too broad, too unspecific." Phyllis extended her hands. "You'll get lost, especially at the crucial moment of life and death. It's hard to define what a person wants. Most importantly, do you really know what she wants?"

"Of course, she—" Ashes stopped half way.

"Does Tilly want me to be fighting demons on the frontline?" The answer was clearly a straight no since this was her own decision. If it was the previous mission to locate targets for the phantom instrument, she might have the reason to take it on Tilly's behalf, but this time she still accepted Roland's invitation and joined the sniper team, even though Tilly did not participate in the war.

There was no doubt that she did it partly to grow Sleeping Spell's reputation since as the importance of the Sleeping Spell in Neverwinter grew, Tilly's role at court would be more vital.

But was this the only reason?

Ashes could not help looking at the witches who were asleep. The tiredness was still in their faces but they looked so quiet and peaceful. Ashes' eyes moved from Sylvie, Maggie, to the other witches of the Sleeping Island and eventually to the rest of her companions.

Suddenly, Ashes asked, "Why are you telling me this?"

In any case, she was only an acquaintance to Phyllis. They had occasionally exchanged their experience of swordplay and fighting skill and were far from close friends. However Phyllis shared with her a topic on temperament and the Taquila survivors' ambitions. It all seemed very strange to Ashes. She thought that Phyllis was not the type of person to talk about these things with every person she met.

"Because you're an Extraordinary," Phyllis said in a grim tone. "You're the flowers of the witches with unimaginable potential. In the era of the Union, every combat-type Extraordinary was trained with the utmost care. As long as they could push the limits of their potential and become a Transcendent, they would be capable of killing a Senior Demon all by themselves. These types of witches would gain the most popularity and they would be elected as the new leader of the Union."

With that, Phyllis arose and saluted Ashes. "Perhaps I have no right to teach an Extraordinary how to improve, but having the right mindset is essential to becoming a leader". As far as I know, all the Transcendents in the Union were born in battle, and those Extraordinaries who couldn't successfully become Transcendents were all eventually killed by the demons," she paused. "I hope you won't meet that fate, Extraordinary Ashes."

The God Punishment Witch even addressed Ashes by an honorific title in the last sentence.

"You don't need to..." Ashes frowned.

"Just take it as an old fool who hasn't seen a Transcendent for over 400 years." Phyllis laughed. "Don't worry, I won't salute you this way. It's time to sleep now though, I'll see you in 2 hours."

"Yeah, good night."

When the cave returned to silence, Ashes looked up, staring at the sky through the crack of the cave ceiling for a long time.

After Roland hung up the phone called from the frontline, he marked out a new route on the map.

It was the 22nd day since Operation Summit started and so far, the plan was going smoothly. More Devilbeasts were spotted patrolling the forest, diverting the First Army further and further off the main route. It seemed that the demons attached more

importance to the Taquila ruins and so left a massive blind spot south of their outpost.

Of course, the demons kept patrol teams nearby and generally speaking, no enemies could remain unspotted before they approached and launched an attack.

However the First Army didn't need to close the distance.

The artillery battalion had a complete firing table and was equipped with refined Longsong Cannons that enabled them to launch precise and fatal attack 10 kilometers away.

Chapter 977: Gliding Wings

"Three days," Nightingale said suddenly.

"Yes, there are three days left." Roland nodded. If we take the army's current speed, they should reach the planned staging area within three days and launch attacks from there. The base was to be set on the slope of a hill facing the demon camp where it would look like a fort from the french maginot line. It offered the army a broad field of view and was in general a very good place to build fortifications.

Once the First Army entrenched the hill, it was almost impossible for the demons to shake their defensive line that was formed by guns and cannons.

In the meantime however, a lot of pressure would be put onto the sniper team over the next few days.

When the Army was on the march, demon scouts could easily intercept with them while on the vast open plain. Witches would have to work double time to keep these scouts from reporting back.

But as the demons send out more patrols, sheer numbers would just overrun the witches' surveillance net and demons would undoubtedly narrow down patrol areas where their scouts went MIA. Eventually, some credible information of the First Army's movements would make its way back. By then, it would be too risky for the witches to take any action.

The best result would be if the demons noticed the witches' presence in the area and sent out their flying units whilst the witches make the decision to return to the First Army. This would waste the demons' strategic units and give the First Army enough time to make camp before the demons could launch a surgical strike.

This assumes that the witches and demons would act this way though.

A small misjudgment of the situation could trigger some unforeseen consequence however.

"You should give them credit," Nightingale said, seeming to read Roland's expression. "The Taquila witches are probably good at assessing the risk, and they have the Magic Ark to use to escape. Even they run across a large scouting group, the witches will be a hard nut for those demons to crack."

"You're right." Roland held his cheek. To be honest, the cause of all these troubles could be traced back to Neverwinter's weakness. The slow speed of marching on foot had been an obvious drawback for the First Army. That was why the team had to run the risk of battle. If the army had wheeled vehicles, then the team would only need to hold off the demons for a day. And even if the enemies saw his army marching on them, they would not have time to hold the army back.

After thinking about how the problems eventually went back to Neverwinter's development, he would might as well just focus on that.

"By the way, have Wendy grasped the principles of flight?"

"Almost." Nightingale laughed as she threw a piece of dried fish into her mouth. "She even talked in her dream last night, something like 'the runway cleared' and 'all lights green'."

"That's good." Roland glanced out of the window. "The weather seems pretty good today. Maybe our flight trials can be put on schedule earlier than usual."

"Oh? Are you going to put that thing to the test?" Nightingale's eyes brightened.

"What, are you interested?"

"How can I not be?" she said excitedly. "One can fly in the sky

even without wings. A thing that can help you fly more freely than the hot air balloon and can be controlled by anyone. That sounds just as incredible as the miracles. If you succeed, do you know how your subjects will look on you? Their reverence for you will be higher than God."

Nightingale's eyes shined with every word coming out her lips. She was full of joy as if she relived the ecstasy of chaos drinks once again while being admired by her followers.

Roland could not help laughing. "We're still working on it. There's still a long way to go before we achieve the goal you said."

The steam engine didn't have enough horsepower to drive an aircraft off the ground. Roland knew he needed to reinvent the combustion engine soon.

"But it'll come true, won't it?" Nightingale smiled back at him as she walked up to the door with her hands on her back.

"Yes," Roland answered decisively. "It will."

...

One kilometer east to Shallow Beach.

Despite its name, the beach was completely submerged, leaving a long line of cliffs erecting above the water surface. The line had stretched to the southeast and eventually formed the borderline of the south of Graycastle.

For the inland people who lived in the Western Region, the borderline was no more than a part of hills where they could see the endless whirlpool sea as they crested the gentle slope; for the traders on sailing boats, the borderline was like an impassable barrier. Because of the cliff that was at least 15 meters high above the water, it was impossible for their boats to dock, let alone unload the goods. That was why the Western Region, where one-third of its border connected the sea, had no seaport before they opened up a passage towards the Shallow Beach.

In other words, apart from the damage resulting from the Months of Demons, the lack of seaports was the main reason why the West Region was less developed than Eastern and Southern counterparts.

However, now this unusual terrain could serve as a perfect place for flight test.

As Roland and his companions arrived, the Garrison had sealed off the area one kilometer around.

At the end of the concrete runway, the soldiers were pushing three identical prototypes of the glider onto a platform.

"Oh! That's your new machine?" Thunder said, touching his chin. "It indeed looks like a seabird. But compared with the powerful steam engine, it seems... a little fragile."

As the most reliable overseas allies, both Thunder, the distinguished explorer in Fjords, and the businesswoman Margaret were invited. Thunder's comment did not surprise Roland, who instead smiled mysteriously and turned to ask Margaret, "What do you think?"

"Your Majesty," she said, "to be honest, it looks so different from your previous inventions that I would have thought it must be the something that the Society of Wondrous Crafts used to fool us in your name."

"The Society of Wondrous Crafts?" Roland asked curiously. "What organization is that?"

"A society set up by a group of half-craftsman, half-explorer lunatics," Margaret explained. "They refused to live a plain life as craftsmen and were also afraid of sailing in the unpredictable sea, so the lot focused on an assortment of odd inventions. Two years ago, one of them made a similar thing, a pair of wooden wings that was said to be able to help people fly."

"Wooden...wings?"

"It looked a little like yours except that it was much smaller and about the same size as a man."

"Did he succeed?" Wendy could not help asking.

"No," Margaret shook her head. "He wore the wings and jumped from a high tower, as soon as the wings flipped over and he started to drop like a stone until he hit on the ground and died immediately."

Wendy swallowed hard, almost regretting to say that.

"Before that trial, the man had claimed several times that he successfully flew on a number of occasions. This garnered attention from our chamber but as a result only made him look like a fool and also worsened the society's reputation as if it wasn't bad enough."

As Roland listened to the story, he could not help sighing. The man, who had made the wings of wood, thought that since the lifting was the key to keep a thing flying in the air, only a frame of hard materials that could withstand the force of lift needed. This was naive but it was still one of the first prototypes of the fixed wing and went beyond simply imitating birds.

Actually, the man should be viewed as a pioneer in exploring the skies. Definitely wiser than those who invented things like man-made feather wings, flying umbrellas, flying cloaks, and so forth.

Roland believed his previous successes were not completely without failure. He probably tested from a low height where there were less variables to consider. For this sort of test, you would have to account for strong contact force against the wind as your rate of descent becomes larger. you could predict on a graph when the man could not overcome the force to maintain stability and crash.

It was a pity that islanders in Fjords only admired the explorers who could find new livable places for them and had a prejudice

against those who were afraid of sailing.

"We shouldn't call him a liar," Roland said slowly. "In fact, it's a great price we have to pay for the possibility of getting rid of the bond of the earth and being able to fly in the sky. Without the help of the witches, I also need to experience that testing process. If the man had a name, record his story."

Margaret was a little shocked, then she dropped a curtsey, "As you wish, Your Majesty."

Roland moved his eyes back to the Mark I Glider, which was getting ready for its first flight. In contrast to the train and the iron ship, it indeed looked fragile.

It had no cabin, and apart from the large wings, it was a frame with no covers. The seats were set between the wings to make it easy for the flyers to escape. The whole structure looked simpler than a model at first glance.

Unlike the machines Roland had made before, the aircraft was actually just a collection of things he heard from his acquaintance. All he knew was the principle of flight, which was far from enough to make a real aircraft.

The first thing on order was to write a Flight Manual.

These prototypes seemed simple, but they already contained all the essential factors the flyers needed to control the machine.

It looked like a newly born hairless chick.

But it was a beginning of a new wave of travel for all humans.

Chapter 978: Flight

To give the glider speed, Roland requested the Ministry of Construction to build a runway along the cliff towards the sea. It was designed with both ends curved upward like a crescent.

Once the glider was lifted and fixed in position, it could be released by unleashing the fixer. Due to gravity, it would glide forward and speed up until it darted out of the runway. The flyer would have a similar experience to sitting on a roller coaster in the modern world, though it would be far less thrilling.

Of course, these alone were insufficient as the wings needed more power to ascend. Thus, Wendy had to provide some wind to lift the wings.

Once the glider darted out of the cliff that was 15 meters above the water surface, it would have plenty of buffer space. Whether the glider ascended or descended, its slow speed provided both the flyer and rescuer time to prepare.

This was the reason why Roland designed the prototype to have two seats in the first place.

Now that both Lightning and Maggie were fighting on the Barbarian Land. The rescue job was naturally handed over to Tilly.

She took the job joyfully.

"It's time to board the plane," Roland said to both girls as he thought it was time to take off.

Wendy nodded. She clenched her fists to encourage herself and then walked up to the glider with Tilly.

...

It was not until she was on board that she found the aircraft to be much larger than she had expected.

Particularly the two pairs of straight wings that separately lay

above her head and below her feet. They were larger than any birds' and were even longer than the transfigured Maggie's wings.

As Wendy saw the slim tip of the wings vibrating in the sea wind, concern rose inside her. It felt like the wings would easily snap from strong winds once the glider took off.

Roland had mentioned that the vibration of the wings was normal. The wings were assembled from a frame with a skin wrapping around it. The frame was made of hard aluminum. This was to ensure that it could endure the impact of air currents when the glider flew slowly through the air. The skin was created by Soraya. It was more resistant than ordinary leather and cloth. As a result, the wings looked quite slim and frail. Compared to the area of the wings, their thickness could almost be ignored. It was as if they were pieces of paper.

"My Lady, let me know if you're ready." A soldier's voice awoke Wendy.

"I see. Well... the first step is..."

"Confirm that every control surface is okay." Tilly on the back seat tried to calm her down. "Don't be nervous. I'll protect you even if something goes wrong."

"Thank you." Wendy felt relieved when she heard that. Exactly, she was not the only one who took His Majesty's class on the principles of flight. If someone could remind her of the steps she had forgotten, she would make fewer mistakes.

"First, pull the main lever to control the tail elevator."

Taking a deep breath, Wendy put both hands on an iron lever before her seat and pulled it. As she did that, a click was heard under her seat. She knew that the sound was produced when the wire connected to the other end of the lever pulled tail. She had done this step hundreds of times on the simulator before the prototype was ready.

"The elevator is okay. The next step is... um, the rudder," Tilly continued.

But the components in the simulator were much simpler. It only contained two vertical levers, two pedals, and a few wire ropes. At first, it was hard for Wendy to believe that only these few things could allow the glider fly like a bird. After all, it was almost as simple as controlling as a bicycle.

The elevation control lever could only be moved forward and back while the direction control lever could only be moved left and right because the holder had limited their movement space. On the other hand, a bicycle's head could make circles.

"The rudder is okay too. Last is the aileron."

According to His Majesty, an aircraft generally had three pairs of wings. One in the front and two in the back, giving the impression of the shape of "±" when viewed from the front. The rudder, which was the erected part, worked like the one of a boat. It could change the direction of the aircraft's nose in the wind.

The short horizontal bar was the elevator, which was also called the "tail". It rose and dropped with the aircraft's nose, looking very similar to a rudder flipped on its side. With the knowledge from the chapter "Decomposition and Synthesis of Forces" in Primary Physics, Wendy could easily understand the principle of this component.

The longer horizontal bar represented the aileron. Wendy did not understand why it was called the "aileron" until she saw the real thing. It was inlaid at the back of the large wing and was no more than one-tenth the size of the wing. Two ailerons were connected with iron wire to the two pedals near her two feet, one left and one right.

Unlike the former two components, the two ailerons must be in inverse (one up and one down) to work. However, if disproportionate forces impact on the two ailerons, the aircraft

would deflect from its course or possibly even roll over. Hence, they were the most important part Wendy needed to handle in flight.

Wendy had once asked His Majesty why he had designed the ailerons when the rudder could also change the flight direction. He explained that every movement of the aircraft required the cooperation of the three control surfaces in combination. If the flyer only moved the rudder, the body of the aircraft would tend to move horizontally. Thus, when making a tight turn, the flyer must pull the elevator down to keep it stable.

Thus, he needed a detailed testing result to write a Flight Manual that could really guide people. He needed to find the answer to questions like: In different circumstances, how is the orbit maneuver controlled? How does the wind direction impact the aircraft? What is the deficiency of the aircraft when controlling it? and so forth. Only by clearly learning this information could he make a truly reliable aircraft.

"The ailerons seem okay too." Tilly patted Wendy's shoulder. "I'll leave the rest to you."

Wendy felt her heart beat faster. She glanced at Roland in the distance before turning to the soldier. "I'm ready, loosen the fixer."

"Yes, please watch out!" The soldiers moved immediately.

"The runway is clear and lights are all green," Wendy whispered in her heart. Although she did not exactly understand what those words meant, she would still say it, since His Majesty said it could bring luck.

With a gentle shake, the glider was pushed onto the runway.

Then it descended.

The wheel creaked as it rolled on the runway, and the aircraft started to shake. Wendy felt as if the sea at the other end was approaching her as she raced down the runway towards it.

For a moment, her heart was in her mouth.

"What did she need to do next?"

Wendy panicked when she saw that the glider had passed half of the runway yet showed no signs of flying.

"The wind!" Tilly shouted.

Yes, the wind. The speed generated on the runway was not fast enough to make the glider take off whilst carrying both of them. She needed to create a stable and mild wind to lift its wings.

Just as the idea emerged in her head, she took action. The magic spiral worked and formed an invisible air current which lightly supported the wings.

With that, the harsh creaking noise subsided. It was as if the glider no longer had any weight. Before Wendy could figure out how it happened, the glider had rushed off the cliff.

For a short period of time, the glider ascended, giving her a sense of overweight. It felt like someone pressing her down into her seat.

As her body was drawn back, she could not help but pull the main lever down.

The aircraft's nose responded to her command and rose even higher.

Her view changed. She could no longer see the earth full of the leaves and withered grass. Even the vast whirlpool-like sea was almost out of her sight. Instead, the clear blue sky filled her view whilst the shimmering light forced her to narrow her eyes.

For a moment, Wendy felt like a petrel soaring up into the sky against the light.

It felt so unconstrained. She finally understood why His Majesty said that the aircraft was totally different from a hot air balloon.

But just a few seconds later, Wendy found that the sound of the wind had subsided.

The glider's nose was still high, but its speed no longer allowed it to ascend. Time seemed stopped. Wendy wanted to strengthen the wind under main wings, but this ended up turning the entire aircraft upside down.

"Too much wind!" Tilly shouted.

Before Wendy had time to find the problem, the glider had fallen like a stone.

Chapter 979: Another Kind of Genius

Everyone present witnessed it.

The glider fell down the cliff and out of their sight shortly after it left the runway. It happened so fast that no one had time to respond.

Roland also feared for their safety.

He had foreseen the possibility of all sorts of accidents during the trial. Although he had prepared more than one prototype in order to increase the flyer's experience with as many trials as possible, he did not expect the first crash to come so early.

In theory, the glider was slow, low-loaded, and easy to control. A little wind was able to maintain its airtime, making it very friendly to a new hand. In fact, there were only a few mistakes that could make the flyer lose control of the aircraft. Roland had emphasized these points whilst explaining the principles. This time, Wendy obviously lifted the aircraft's nose too high. As a result, the aircraft lost its original speed and started to drop.

Although the glider had lost its ascending speed, the situation could still be salvaged with appropriate actions.

As Wendy was capable of creating winds.

All she had to do was blow wind down towards the tail whilst reducing the wind that lifted the glider. This would force the glider's nose down and therefore its body would regain speed.

Unfortunately, the wind Wendy applied to the main wings was too strong and abrupt. As a result, the glider flipped over and thus they had no choice but to abandon the aircraft.

Although the glider could be saved, Roland cared more about the safety of the flyers as there were no safety devices installed, such as seatbelts. In fact, the glider only contained an aluminum chair with two arms and a backrest to steady the flyers. It was easy to

imagine what would happen when the glider was overturned.

Fortunately, Tilly did not leave everyone worrying for too long.

A few seconds later, she was holding Wendy's arm and appeared on the edge of the cliff.

"Are you alright?" Roland asked anxiously.

"Don't worry. We're fine." Tilly smiled and panted slightly. "In order to avoid being hit, I flew down a little to dodge it before ascending."

Unlike Lightning who would significantly lose speed when she carried load, a witch who controlled the Stone of Flight would not lose speed even if she carried a person. Instead, the stone would consume much more magic power and become harder to control. Although Princess Tilly had made light of the situation, Roland knew that the rescue would not have been completed so easily without her remarkable control over the stone.

"My apologies... Your Majesty." Wendy said, looking a bit frustrated. "You've spent so much time making that aircraft, but I..."

Roland comforted her immediately, "It's not your fault. No one is born to know how to fly an aircraft. That's part of the knowledge unknown to all of us. The materials of the glider were more valuable than the process of making it. As long as we can recover the wreckage, we won't suffer a great loss."

"We won't?" Wendy asked.

"I can promise you that His Majesty is telling the truth," Nightingale said as she suddenly appeared and faced her friend.

Wendy felt relieved. "I see... I'll have another try!"

Roland was amused. "Is that another usage of the ability to detect lies?" He always felt that Wendy had worked too hard after she was appointed the head of the Witch Union.

"Don't you want to rest?" asked Roland.

"No!" Wendy exclaimed.

"Well then, just keep in mind that safety comes first," said Roland.

"Don't worry brother. I got this," Tilly said as she smiled.

...

In the end, it turned out that flying was not so easy to master.

The second trial did not last longer than three minutes.

Surprisingly, Wendy made great progress this time. She managed to successfully raise the glider to an altitude of nearly 50 meters high.

Unfortunately, as the glider was turning, the wings rolled too much.

Roland could see that Wendy had been trying hard to adjust the wind direction in order to re-balance the glider, however, this only resulted in a short unstable wobble before it dropped once again.

Tilly decisively pulled Wendy off the seat in advance, before the glider tumbled and crashed into the ground. Both wings were twisted completely out of shape, leaving the glider in an unflyable state until it could be repaired.

Compared to the first flyer in human history, who only managed to fly three meters above the ground, the participants of this trial equally deserved to be remembered in history for their remarkable accomplishments.

Sadly, Roland needed more than just putting an aircraft in the sky. To deal with the approaching Battle of Divine Will, he had to equip the army with aircrafts as soon as possible.

With such a high crashing frequency, Roland soon knew how depressing it felt to wreck three aircrafts in a single morning.

"What went wrong this time?" Roland asked.

"We bumped into a crosswind," Tilly said as she shrugged. "It caused us to lose speed."

Wendy nodded, feeling guilty. "I panicked and couldn't control the glider or my powers. If only I focused more on the gliders operation, I might have been able to prevent it from dropping," said Wendy depressingly.

These words reminded Roland of a problem that he had previously ignored. Witches had to concentrate when exerting their powers, hence their abilities were prone to fluctuations when in a state of panic. Thus, if a witch could not accurately control her ability mid-flight, she could potentially worsen the situation instead of helping it.

It seemed that this problem could only be solved with more practice.

"How about... letting me have a try," Tilly suddenly said.

"You?" Roland said whilst a little surprised.

"I took your class too. If I controlled the glider, there would be no need for me to worry about getting distracted by the wind. This way, Wendy would have less burden to bear. And..." Tilly raised the corners of her mouth, her eyes shined itching to have a try. "...I believe I can operate this big thing."

Seeing as Wendy was not against it, Roland agreed after a moment of thought.

Roland had chosen Wendy for the flight test because of her ability. She could sense the changes in the wind and generate air currents to support the glider when required. Though, it turned out that supporting the glider with wind was not as easy as he thought.

In that case, it should be fine to change the plan slightly.

Since Tilly was his nominal sister and the leader of Sleeping Spell, it was also part of his responsibility to make her happy.

There was only one prototype left anyway, might as well let them try. It did not matter if they destroyed it as next time he would prepare more alternatives.

...

When the third glider took off, Roland came to realize that he had underestimated Tilly.

The glider initially flew leveled to the sea before steadily rising. When the glider turned down away from the sun, the flight rhythm suddenly started to change.

It flew soaring through the wind, like an agile petrel, alternating between the sky and sea. Although it may be inappropriate to compare a clumsy glider to an elegant petrel, the way the glider turned, swooped, and ascended was very graceful under Tilly's control. Roland felt a beautiful sense of harmony from its movements in the sky.

Meanwhile, he realized that Tilly was not overly relying on Wendy to produce wind. She only required it when the glider lost both its speed and height. At these times, she would adjust the position of the glider to allow the magic wind to lift it higher.

She was using the control surfaces on their own to control the glider.

Furthermore, she has had no more than 30 minutes of piloting experience.

It was surprising to see someone so gifted.

Roland then realized why Tilly was more versed in using Magic Stones than any other witch. Based on Agatha's opinion, Magic Stones were not easy to control because a witch would feel a sense of discrepancy. It was as if the stone became an extra limb when she activated it. Could this be Tilly's area of expertise after

becoming an Extraordinary?

It was this astounding nervous system that enabled her to coordinate and accept new things more easily and quickly.

It explained why she could master the trick of steering an aircraft so quickly.

Whilst in thought, Roland could not help feeling a surge of pity.

It was a shame that he could not make a Gundam.

Otherwise, the demons would have had to face an unparalleled ACE.

An hour later, the glider was welcomed by the audience's wild cheers as it slowly pressed its tail and landed steadily on the grass.

Chapter 980: Ordinary People

...

"Will Lady Tilly be responsible for writing the Flight Manuel?" Anna put down her book and laughed gently. "Wendy won't be frustrated, will she?"

"Perhaps, she will, but I think she can take care of herself." Roland moved a little to get in a more comfortable position.

"Why are you so sure?"

"Nightingale asked for an advance on her next month's Chaos Drinks, and Scroll applied for three ice cream rolls. I believe that with both of them being with her, Wendy will recover in one night. Besides, I also gave her two bottles of fruit wine to comfort her. I don't think she'll brood on her failure after she gets drunk."

"Is the wine called 'Drink Yourself to Death'?"

"No, it's called Vanilla Medium."

"What? Such a common name..."

Nights like these were some of Roland's most relaxing moments. The two of them, having washed off a day's tiredness, leaned back against the soft, black velvet pillows and shared that day's stories. Anna would often prepare a book for bedtime reading, such as travelogues and biographies, while Roland would lay on his side and enjoy her beautiful face.

This was one of the few times they could stay so close to each other ever since the construction of the railway in the Misty Forest began.

Every four days, Anna had to take the train to the northwest and process the rail that Leaf had paved, then she had to return by train that evening.

Besides welding the railway, she also had a lot of other work to

do.

Such as: making critical components of the weapons,

Improving the new machine's tools, while making replacements for the old ones,

Cutting aluminum bars, and assembling the glider.

The industry of the Western Region had grown dramatically since the time it began. The people were using primary metal materials and production tools without the witches' assistance. No matter how fast the industry advanced, it was still slower than the speed of Roland updating the designs.

It made moments like these all the more precious.

"It would be nice to have the Flight Manual written by Lady Tilly." Anna shifted the topic back to the flight test. "After all, your invention is made for all people to use and her feelings may be closer to the ordinary people. Besides, as far as learning ability is concerned, she has mastered almost as much knowledge as I have. She can probably offer you more help than Wendy."

"Yeah... this isn't something Wendy is good at," Roland said, nodding. "I should have thought of it from the start."

"Have you thought out the machine for the new aircraft?"

"Of course," he replied confidently, "this is my expertise after all. Now that there's a dream world where I can find relevant materials, I'm able to draw the design for a prototype immediately. We can start to produce the aircraft directly after the oil fractionation tower is completed."

After that, they talked about the other industrial problems of Neverwinter, including everything from technical details to development plans. The talk was comfortable and harmonious, Anna not only understood his meaning but also added many relevant comments and compliments. For Roland, it was refreshing to have someone so considerate and tactful.

As Roland was staring at the girl's flashing eyes, his thoughts shot back to how few girls there were at his old mechanical engineering college and job. This would explain why he never saw any salary improvements and suddenly he felt that there must be a God of mechanics blessing him.

Ana laughed, probably after being stared at for too long. "Do I look that beautiful?"

Roland did not answer. Instead, he let actions to express his feelings. He leaned over and kissed her ear.

"Had I known you were such a man, I would have acted earlier." Anna smiled.

"Does she mean the night she intercepted him at the castle gate after the end of the first celebration of the Months of Demons?"

"What did you initially think of me?" Roland wondered.

"In my eyes, no matter how merciful you are, in the end, a prince is a prince. You were also above all the nobles, which are very different from us as it is."

"Haha ... sorry to disappoint you." He pretended to be sorry. "I'm just an ordinary person."

"No, it couldn't be better..." Anna shook her head and raised the corners of her mouth. "Because I'm an ordinary person as well."

Two days later in the Barbarian Land.

The main force of the First Army finally arrived at the station of Northbound Slope, on schedule.

Iron Axe could not help having doubts, for it was such a smooth and peaceful journey as they had not suffered any attacks they had expected, not even aerial harassment.

He had prepared to carve out a way through the many enemies, but he saw none of them. Their only battle was with a pack of

hunting wolves. Apart from that, the entire plain was strangely quiet, as if all the watchers had been distracted by the sniper team.

If that were the case, he could swallow his disbelief. But the information that the witches told him was not correct.

In fact, the demons only strengthened their patrol forces in the first couple of days and then withdrew most of the Devilbeasts, leaving the outpost un-patrolled until now. It seemed that they had given up watching the area.

After the army camp, Iron Axe summoned a meeting in the central camp with the General Staff and the heads of the troops.

"Why do the demons stay quiet? What do you think?"

"It is indeed a little strange..." Agatha, who represented the Witch Union in this mission, mulled it over for a while and said, "Only the red mist can restrict their movement, but Sylvie said the outpost was still under construction, which means the red mist supply line is still ongoing."

"Their motives would be easy to understand if they were nobles," Knight Morning Light said. "It's either because something happened in their rear or their reluctance to sacrifice a few Devilbeasts." Then he turned to Agatha. "Can Lady Sylvie see what's happening in the Taquila ruins?"

"The ruins are too far away from the sniper team." Agatha shook her head. "They gave up luring the enemy yesterday and are heading toward us."

"How long will it take them?" Iron Axe asked.

"At least four days." Agatha glanced at the map. "Although the Magic Ark is fast, they have been heading in the direction opposite from the First Army's from the start. But if Lightning and Maggie move alone, the two of them will arrive by tonight."

"There is no need for us to guess their intentions," Edith suddenly said. "Whatever they aim to do, it's a great opportunity for us. We

have arrived at the station without any losses, and the underground supply line is running smoothly. It's the best start we could've hoped for. What we need to do next is set up the Longsong Cannons and raze the demons' outpost to the ground."

Her plan stated the obvious.

On second thought, Iron Axe asked, "The Magic Ark is almost impossible to notice as long as it remains underground, right?"

"You can put it that way," Agatha replied.

"Could Maggie bring Lady Sylvie here as well?"

"I'll tell her."

"Thank you." Iron Axe quickly made a decision. "Battalion commander Van'er!"

"Yes, Sir!" Van'er stepped forward.

"Set up the Longsong Cannons and get ready to fire," he said clearly and carefully. "The attack will begin tomorrow evening!"

Chapter 981: Unexpected Start

Morning Light climbed to the top of the slope and his heart raced as he watched the busy but well-organized battlefield in front of him.

This was not the first time he has been on the battlefield. At the age of 15, he was already an excellent knight squire, following the Lord during the charges. When he became an adult, he even won the reputation of the first knight of the Western Region.

He was no stranger to war.

However, the atmosphere here was completely different.

Before the battle, nobles would motivate, promise rewards, eat and drink in order to improve the army's morale. That is why the freemen and mercenary camps would often immerse themselves with wild cheers, similar to an open market with the only difference being the absence of wine. At such occasions, knights would always laugh at their men for being so oblivious of a few breadcrumbs, not knowing they would have to sacrifice themselves for it.

At that time, Ferlin Eltek also believed that only nobles knew the art of war. Without a noble leading them, freemen would lack cohesion, just like scattered sand.

Only when Duke Ryan was defeated at Border Town by a bunch of miners did he realize that the reality was different from what he imagined.

However, since he was satisfied with achieving his revenge, he did not think about it further and instead devoted his energy to his wife Irene.

Two years later, thanks to his father, Morning Light joined the Adviser Department only to find out that the war has completely changed.

The First Army's discipline during the last month's march has already astonished him and yet, the professionalism they displayed right now would make most of the nobility feel ashamed.

Without any agitation, everyone was familiar with their tasks: at the bottom of the slope, several trenches had been excavated, while the excavated soil was put into sacks and piled up to form rows of simple walls in front of the machine gun area. In the middle of the trenches, there were wired iron nets and chevaux de frise which were assembled on spot. Achieving a frontal breakthrough would be almost as hard as breaching through a city wall.

Many cushion areas had also been set up behind the defensive line so that even if the machine guns were breached, they would not lose the battle. The Taquila witches could both protect the Artillery Battalion and provide support for the front line at any time as back up troops.

The slope that was the furthest behind was the core of the First Army's attack— 6 Longsong Cannons, pointing straight at the demon's outpost. The cannon soldiers were reviewing the shooting parameters, making the final preparations for the upcoming assault.

All of this did not need to be arranged by a commander but instead, in just one day, the First Army turned this area into an adequate battlefield.

Ferlin had seen the power of the new firearms during the cannon demonstration, but still, they were only machines—the operators of the weapons had to be humans.

Moreover, it was exactly those freemen soldiers who really surprised him.

A platoon with such strict discipline and clear division of labor was hard to be assembled even by the knightages of the great nobles.

Even though he had previously seen the change in the people of Neverwinter, that was still nothing compared to his shock right now.

"Do you understand now?" Suddenly, Morning Light heard a familiar voice behind him. "The answer to that question before."

Ferlin turned around and nodded at Sir Eltek. "Yes. father."

When His Majesty announced that he wanted to unify Graycastle within a month and attack Hermes and the Kingdom of Dawn simultaneously, the Adviser Department did not have any objections but Instead devised a number of seemingly incomprehensible plans.

The reason behind that was these weapons and soldiers. Thanks to them, no one in the mainland was his enemy, or rather... the strength of the enemies could no longer be compared with his.

"Unfortunately, His Majesty forbade nobles to join the army," Ferlin said regretfully, "compared to sitting in an office, I would rather experience fighting alongside those people—"

"Individual braveness is no longer so important. The Adviser Department suits you more," his father smiled. "Besides, it's a battle with unknown enemies such as demons so what if something happened? I am still waiting for a grandson. Irene's friend recently gave birth, I think. You should try harder too."

"Father!" Ferlin could not help but hold his forehead.

"Fine, fine, I won't talk about it," said Eltek while stroking his beard. "The sun is about to set, let's go back to the camp. The Artillery Battalion will start firing soon—can't stand that noise."

"Yes," Morning Light looked at the camp one last time and then went down the hill with his father.

He also had another battlefield to attend to and finish his duties.

...

At five in the evening, the cannons started firing.

According to the previously adjusted shooting angles, the 6 cannons started firing one by one, breaking the silence of the Fertile Plains.

400 hundred years later, humans have once again stepped into these plains, launching an assault at the demons.

The first two rounds were to test and fix any discrepancies that might occur and after they received Sylvie's feedback, the cannon sounds became synchronized.

The improved 152milimeter Longsong Cannon was a bit closer to its historical predecessor. In order to increase the shooting range, the ammunition chamber was doubled and the shells had to be filled part by part. So, the shooting time was also increased by half. However, driven by the higher pressure, these cannons could cause a fatal threat to fixed targets even ten kilometers away.

Because of the increase in length, the weight was also affected thus bringing more trouble for the logistics. The final solution was to dismantle the cannons into four pieces and carry them with the Taquila worm carrier.

Nobody could hear the sounds or see the flames that occurred when a shell landed. This was an entirely new form of war. If not for the several cannon battles that they had already fought, the soldiers would never believe that they could destroy the enemy's strongholds and cities just by a few repetitive moves, even without the need to face the enemy.

There were mainly two reasons for choosing to launch an attack at sunset. Firstly, the effect of the Eye of Magic did not rely on sunlight and could also be used at night to guide the artillery team's shooting. Secondly, the Devilbeasts could not move at night. The demons had no choice but to bear their attacks all night.

The Longsong Cannon would shoot every two minutes but other than the sounds made beyond the skyline, it seemed as if there were no changes at the battlefield in the middle of the night. On the other hand, in Sylvie's eyes, the landscape ten kilometers away had completely changed—

Due to the explosive waves, the landscape was turned over and dozens of Blackstone Pagodas were mostly destroyed. In particular, when the shells went through the mist storage tower, the explosion that followed made the black stones look like an eruptive volcano.

Yet, she still has not discovered the whereabouts of the demons.

Until the early morning of the next day, when everyone assumed that the enemy had abandoned their outpost, the situation suddenly changed.

A large group of demons appeared in the north of the First Army's camp, eight kilometers away from the Northbound Slope!

At the same time, Sylvie also saw dozens of Devilbeasts moving—the enemy, that had gone missing for several days, was now coming towards them.

Chapter 982: Unplanned War

"What is going on?"

In the central tent, the atmosphere in the air was rather heavy. The commander-in-chief Iron Axe was staring at the map on the long table, frowning. "There is neither a red mist supply line nor a warning sign. It is as if all these demons appeared out of thin air!"

They raised the alarm as quickly as possible and the platoons of the First Army were already in position but still, there was a feeling of confusion and insecurity within everyone's mind.

And this happened during Sylvie's surveillance. How would they fight this war without the witches? If the enemy was capable of suddenly appearing eight kilometers away then what would happen if they suddenly appeared in their camp next time?

If this question was not answered, nobody would be able to calm down.

Outside the tent, the Longsong Cannon started firing again after going quiet for half of the night. Additionally, the rate of firing was increased to maximum—it was no longer necessary to save shells since the most important thing now was to reduce the enemy's strength as soon as possible.

"It's impossible that they appeared out of nowhere," Agatha said firmly. "The Red Mist is essential for the survival of the demons, this hasn't changed. If that wasn't the case, they would have already taken over the world. The enemy's number is now close to ten thousand and without the red mist supply line, just by running towards here would result in their death, let alone fighting.

"According to previous intelligence, the outpost here can sustain at most few thousand demons," Iron Axe said after a while. "So what you are saying is that there is another supply line near us which was not discovered by the Eye of Magic?"

"This is the only possible answer—"

"No, there is one more possibility," Edith interrupted. "Since we are able to make the supply line disappear from the surface, the demons may have also been able to think of that."

"Digging an underground tunnel from Taquila to here?" Agatha shook her head. "Without taking into consideration whether or not they have acquired a worm carrier, the construction of a tunnel that would enable the demons to move around is no small task and it conflicts with the time of their first appearance at Taquila. Furthermore, such a huge activity should have been spotted by Sylvie."

"I am not saying that they started from your hometown," Edith stretched and pointed on an x mark on the map. "What if they only started from the outpost?"

"What do you mean," Iron Axe asked with a deep voice.

"Don't you think that the location of the demons' appearance is a bit awkward? She pulled up her dangling hair and continued, "Think about it, if we were a traditional army—without regard to if we were human nobles or union witches, what would be the situation?"

Following the question of the Pearl of the Northern Region, everyone turned their eyes on the map.

From those who could enter the central big tent, some were members of the Adviser Department, some were commanders of the army and some were representatives of the allied forces but none of them showed slow reactions—soon, everyone thought of a possibility.

In an instant, there was a sound of astonishment in the big tent.

The sound of their sighs was soon covered by the cannon firing outside of the tent—but under the shaking of the ground, everyone could see the surprise in each other's eyes.

Only when the firing stopped, Morning Light finally broke the silence and said, "Are you saying... that the outpost is a trap set by the demons?"

If they were a traditional army, they would have to start a siege in order to destroy the outpost and that would mean exposing their back to the demons. So, if the demons appeared at that time, they would form a natural surrounding with the ruins of Taquila. So, under the attack from both sides, the first army's fate would be easy to imagine.

The two opposite sides would just manage to fit in the two-kilometer battlefield and looking at the map, it looked exactly like a huge pocket.

"So they were certain that we would come?" Iron Axe asked.

Edith did not answer but looked at the ancient witches' representative—Zooey.

Compared to the most of them, Zooey's expression did not really change and her face was emotionless as always. "If it was the Union then we would definitely come. Letting the demons build an outpost would result in an expansion of the red line which is suicide—the destruction of a city would always begin from the inability to stop the enemy's expansion." She paused and then said, "But they have never done this before."

"Well. the times have changed," the Pearl of the Northern Region waved her hands. "If that's the case, this explains a lot. The demons don't think that humans can pose a threat to a Devilbeast team and Neverwinter is a witch city essentially, so they set up this trap. If they were lucky, they would manage to defeat all the combat witches at once. So, to make us come, not only did they not attack us en route but also decreased their surveillance area on purpose, all of it leading up to this moment now—what do you all think of this assumption?"

"Even if this is true, how were the demons able to hide from Miss

Sylvie's observation?" Sir Eltek asked confused.

"You may not know this but her ability is not omniscient," Edith replied. "If I remember correctly, there is a considerable gap between her observation distance and her perspective distance. Hence, taking into consideration the Devilbeast, she is usually only able to observe at a limited distance—under these circumstances, the Eye of Magic has probably omitted a large area."

Hearing this, everyone could already guess the answer.

"Of course, I'm not blaming Miss Sylvie," Edith sighed, "it's just that we relied too much on her."

Magic power, it was a problem that could not be neglected by the witches. In order to observe what the enemies were doing, Sylvie had to stay alert all the time and carefully plan the usage of her magic power. But the observation of the deep layers of the ground required a huge amount of magic power, just like a bird watching from the sky far above. That is why it was impossible to check every place on the Fertile Plains in detail.

Assuming the demons can only hide near the Red Mist area, she must have checked only the area near the outpost—and limited by the observation distance, the depth of observation would not have been too deep either.

Agatha frowned. "We can verify this point right now." She then activated the Sigil of Listening, "Sylvie, can you check what's happening underneath the Army of Demons?"

"Underground?" Sylvie, who was guiding the cannons at that time, was a little startled, "I can try but my magic power..."

"It's alright."

"Got it." The voice on the other side of the Sigil stopped for a moment and then everyone heard her surprised voice, "This is strange... the Magic Eye's line of sight has been blocked, I can't see anything. There is only darkness underground!"

Everyone remained silent. This result had indirectly proved Edith's assumption.

Being tricked by the enemy was definitely not a good feeling.

For a moment, the only sound in the tent was the firing of the cannons.

"Pow, pow, pow."

At this time, Iron Axe suddenly clapped his hands.

"Lord?" Morning Light asked.

"If this is the case, then I can rest assured." He said slowly. "In the end, the following tough battle will decide who the prey is."

"You are right, lord commander-in-chief," Edith smiled. "Though they did not guess their opponent correctly, the result is still the same. Both sides can be considered lucky. Or maybe, we are luckier—to confront the enemy head to head in a carefully planned battlefield is exactly what we want, isn't it? They didn't have a chance to react to the bombing last night and now not only have they lost their bait but also have to face our fully prepared soldiers. No matter how you look at it, the situation isn't too bad."

The Pearl of the Northern Region paused for a moment, "Actually, just like what I said at the beginning, we don't need to concern ourselves with the intentions of our enemy. No matter what they want to do, we just need to kill off anyone who dares to come in front of us—that's exactly what the First Army is good at, isn't it?"

At this time, the alarm sounded once again in the camp in a much more urgent manner.

"Air-attack warning."

Everyone understood—they were here.

The Devilbeast, being the front line platoon, had already entered the shooting range of the First Army.

Chapter 983: A Fierce Attack

"Well then, I'm taking off," Agatha announced solemnly.

"Off you go." A cold sneer broke across Zooey's face. "We've been waiting for this day for too long."

Unlike the First Army, the commanders of the ancient witches were also powerful combatants. They would be the last to retreat when demons were approaching.

"Ms. Agatha, Ms. Zooey..." Iron Axe suddenly stopped them.

"Is there anything else?"

"Although I shouldn't say this, I think this must be what His Majesty wanted to convey to you," he said thoughtfully. "Please stay safe. Your being alive is the heaviest blow we can inflict on the demons."

"Haha, I won't die so easily before reclaiming Taquila." Zooey turned around and cast Iron Axe a glance. "Thanks for your kind words. I do appreciate it, mortal."

"Don't worry. We know what to do." Smiling, Agatha walked out of the tent.

The sky had darkened. Compared to the defensive battle in Neverwinter last time, the number of the enemies this time increased by several times, and they flew a lot faster as well.

They soon reached the very front of the battlement.

The anti-aircraft guns at the front fired in succession, and in a short moment, the air was heavy with the oppressive sound of anti-aircraft fire. However, the attack was far from effective. Out of over 60 Devilbeasts, only four or five were shot down. The other demons, on the other hand, climbed even higher.

"Those freaking bastards, they're so annoying." Zooey was distraught. "I could crush them with my hands the moment they

dare to land."

In the Union age, the best way to counterattack these monsters was to send out combat witches and Extraordinaries who carried a Stone of Flight. This was also the reason the ancient witches took armies of mortal men so lightly. Without the witches' help, a few Devilbeasts would be more than enough to disperse an army.

"Why aren't they throwing their spears?" Watching the enemies hovering above, Agatha frowned.

But the next moment she immediately knew the demons' real intention. The mounted demons dived for the rear of the defensive line, exactly where the artillery battalion was located.

Agatha and Zooey exchanged a look before instantly to the artilleries' position.

...

Fish Ball was responsible for the central area of the battlement. Because of his meritorious performance in the battle against the demons last time, he had been promoted to unit leader. Although it was not his first time seeing these monsters, the scene of hordes of Devilbeasts attacking him still sent a chill down his spine.

"U-unit leader, shouldn't we fire?" The team member with an ammunition sack in his hand stammered out.

"They're within 900 meters!" The lookout went livid in terror, his Adam's apple quivering.

Fish Ball realized that everyone was scared. Even the most courageous of people would be truly terrified in the presence of such an unimaginable onslaught of enemies. Because of the permeating fear, Fish Ball knew he had to stay cool. Otherwise, they would collapse before the enemy attack even arrived.

At this thought, Fish Ball swallowed hard and tried to speak slower. "Just hang in there. Fire when they're within 300 meters."

Although the machinery instructor told them that the shooting range of Mark I type HMG exceeded 1,500 meters and that its scope range was around 1,000, Fish Ball learned from his personal experience that they could only hit targets within said range when Devilbeasts were flying steady and straight.

The best shooting method was to directly use a concentric ring to noose the enemy based on instincts, rather than taking aim with the scope perched on top.

A poor firing accuracy would undoubtedly affect the soldiers' morale.

He preferred to shoot when the result was guaranteed.

Nevertheless, the short distance between the battlement and the enemies also meant that the latter could launch a counterattack anytime.

Fish Ball sincerely hoped that the additional baffle plate in front of the machine gun was durable enough to stop the demons.

"They dived!" The lookout screamed.

"Now!"

Fish Ball pulled the trigger. He could see a stream of bullets whoosh through the air and crumble the gigantic figure that dashed forward.

The Devilbeast at the very front, who had been hit by at least a dozen bullets from various directions, instantly turned into a cloud of bloody mist. The Mad Demon mounting on its back was no better, its skull cracked open, and legs slashed in half. Its figure was almost indiscernible as it plummeted to the ground.

The death of the enemy exhilarated the soldiers who cheered at their first victory, which injected courage into Fish Ball. He immediately aimed at another Devilbeast that died in the same way as the previous one a few seconds later.

When Fish Ball was about to redouble his efforts, the surroundings suddenly darkened.

The sun seemed to be overspread by a grayish curtain, specking the battlement here and there with flickers of light. When Fish Ball realized what the "curtain" really was, his heart stopped with a horror-filled jerk.

"They're spearing!" He yelled at the top of his lung. "Watch out!"

However, numerous spears pelted down and they had nowhere to hide. The only thing they could do was duck behind their shields, leaving their exposed hands and feet to fate.

Fish Ball held his companion tight, whilst bracing himself to be penetrated by a bone spear.

But the clash he had been anticipating did not come. With a gust of wind, the light was restored.

"U-unit leader, behind!"

Someone exclaimed in surprise.

Fish Ball looked over his shoulder, his heart pounding in his chest, and saw the battlement behind him was a mess. The air was permeated with dust created by the spearing attack. Some were lying on the ground, unconscious, whereas some wounded soldiers were moaning and calling for help in the midst of the smog. The six Longsong Cannons had all stopped firing.

Everybody swallowed hard.

"What're you waiting for?" Fish Ball gnawed his teeth and snarled. "Get back to your position and continue to fire!"

There would be someone else responsible for the provision of first aid and sending reinforcements. What he needed to do now was to shoot down as many Devilbeasts as possible, before the enemies launched their second attack.

The bellow jerked the soldiers out of their trance. The two anti-

aircraft machine guns thundered once more.

Meanwhile, the demons also realized that spearing alone would not completely stop their opponents. Therefore, they divided the Devilbeasts into two groups, one climbing higher to wait for the next round of attacks, while the other dealt directly with the soldiers on the ground through hand-to-hand combat, taking advantage of their superior physical strength.

One Mad Demon dismounted and encountered a man with black hair.

Apparently, it did not take male human being very seriously, for it casually drew the iron ax from around its waist and flailed it at him blankly.

However, the man stopped his blow with only one hand!

Eyes wide open, the Mad Demon did not even have time to think about what had happened before he saw his enemy aiming an iron tube at him.

"WHAM!"

"His Majesty's new weapon is good indeed." Zooey released the demon who collapsed instantly, a big hole in the latter's chest. "If we had this 400 years ago, Taquila probably wouldn't have fallen, and the Three Chiefs wouldn't have turned against each other because of disagreements on the continuity of the human race."

She walked to the unconscious demon and crushed its skull beneath her foot before casting it a cold glance. "But we're still alive and have returned with vengeance. Now, it's time for you to pay for what you've done."

Chapter 984: A Furious Roar

"Ugh..." Van'er scrambled to his feet. After confirming that his body and limbs were still in one piece, he breathed a sigh of relief.

But his heart soon sank the next moment.

Many people close to the Longsong Cannons had been penetrated by bone spears. It was hard to tell whether they were still alive. He saw some soldiers, who had been maimed by bones spears, searching for their broken limbs in the mud. Van'er managed to fight back tears. The artillery battalion was one of the very first squads built and trained by His Majesty. From the beginning when they had fought against the Duke of the Western Region, all the way to the attack at Hermes, they had seldom suffered defeats. Looking at the astonishing casualties, Van'er was heartbroken.

But, Van'er knew this was not the time for him to lament the loss. The angel of the First Army Miss Nana was currently at the battalion shelter. As long as the soldier sent to her was still breathing, Miss Angel would be able to heal him!

"Hello, anybody out there?" Van'er shouted as he crawled to one of the wounded soldiers in a critical condition who got his stomach stabbed. "Anybody help me?"

"Sir, we're here!" Two soldiers came out of the smog, trotting to him.

"Send him to the field hospital." Van'er stuffed the intestines spilling out of the soldier's stomach back in, together with the torn pieces of flesh. "Make sure not to leave anything behind."

"S-sir," The soldier grimaced in pain. "I..."

"Stop talking. If you have the strength to talk, save it to kill demons." Van'er patted his cheek. "Hope you'll get better and be back soon, I'm relying on you to fire. Do you understand?"

After the wounded soldier was sent away, he ran to another field

medic and asked, "Did you come from the camp?"

The man glanced at the badge on Van'er's shoulder and saluted. "Yes, sir! Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Continue with your business. Taking care of the wounded is the top priority." Van'er waved his hand. "What's it like at the front?"

After the artillery suffered the attack, the battlements within 500 meters were enveloped by thick smoke. Except for the closest cannon, Van'er didn't know anything about the other squads. He could only hear the patterings of running footsteps in distance, and the occasional roars of cannons and guns. He was a little surprised that there were no reinforcements at this point, even though the field medics had been called to the scene.

"The demons are coming from above!" The field medic answered hastily while bandaging a wounded soldier. "I just came from the central camp and saw those winged monsters land and engage the heavy infantry."

The demons landed after spearing?

In other words, the present chaos was caused by the infiltration of enemies at the rear. That was why the reserves, who were usually positioned in the central zone, were not able to approach and reinforce the Longsong Cannons at the moment. It also explained why the front was still intact.

Realizing this, Van'er immediately understood what he should do.

He must put the Longsong Cannons back into operation.

The enemy wanted to prevent them from firing at the approaching demons, so he must stop them.

As long as the front line was not penetrated, the enemies would sooner or later be exterminated by the heavy infantry.

Although Van'er didn't know where His Majesty had found those

warriors with such monstrous strength, who could carry weapons comparable in weight to field artillery with ease, one thing was certain — their capacity for battle was only paralleled by the ferocious demons'.

"I'll leave the wounded to you!"

Van'er ran to the ammunition case that had fallen to the ground and used all his strength to pick up a shell. He then staggered to the muzzle and pushed the shell into the bore.

Then he loaded the cannon.

It was actually two people's work, but Van'er finished by himself. He was out of breath by the time the cannon was loaded. Van'er took a deep breath and started to adjust the firing angle based on the enemies' previous marching speed.

At that moment, the field medic dashed toward him, shrieking.

"Sir, behind!"

In that second, Van'er felt his blood freeze. Immediately, he rolled to the ground before even turning around.

His instinct had saved him.

With a loud clink, an ax pelted past him, ruffling his hair, and hitting the breechblock, creating a series of sparks.

Van'er looked up and saw a mad demon glaring at him!

"GRAAAA—!" The Mad Demon raised its ax and stomped towards him, howling.

"I'm done," Van'er thought to himself in despair. Although he had a sword around his waist, he could not draw it when he was on the ground. Even if he did have it in hand, it was impossible for him to block the blow, as demons were far stronger and faster than humans.

As the ax got closer, Van'er reached out his hand, attempting to block the strike...

"Crack!"

A wall of ice suddenly manifested between them. The ax smashed into the wall, sending ice crystals flying from its surface.

Was I... saved?

Van'er turned around in shock and saw a blue-haired witch performing a grabbing motion while watching the demon with a cool stare. She said to Van'er, "Come here, behind me."

Van'er clenched his teeth. Although his legs were too shaky to support his weight, he somehow managed to get to his feet and walked to the witch.

"Gah, Vaaaakaaaa..."

Van'er had no knowledge of the demon's language, but he could tell that it looked murderous and furious.

The demon dashed around the wall and crouched, the right arm with which it held its ax swelling rapidly.

The witch, surprisingly, drew closer to the demon, while ice slowly spread beneath her feet. She looked like the Goddess of Winter.

Just when the demon was about to strike, an icicle burst from the ground and sent the ax flying. In the meantime, the demon's arm was bent at a strange angle. A fraction of its grayish white bone was exposed to the air, hardly covered by any flesh. It was a gruesome scene to behold.

Before the demon could even give a yelp of pain, the ice crystals proliferated rapidly from its ankles and turned it into an ice statue.

"Th-thank you." Van'er let out a sigh of relief.

"It's not over yet. There's going to be a second round of spearing." The witch looked up at the sky, which was currently filled with ash and smoke, and called out. "Miss Molly!"

Van'er suddenly remembered that there was actually a time gap

between each spearing attack. As the demon had just bulked up his arm, it meant that the sky was dangerous once again.

Van'er wondered who Miss Molly was and was puzzled why she didn't seek shelter.

"Leave it to me."

While Van'er was in bewilderment, a young, slightly childish voice came from the distance.

Then Van'er saw an incredible scene!

Above him suddenly appeared a half-transparent blue ball which gradually grew bigger in size. Soon, it covered the area within a radius of 10 meters. Two tentacles at both ends of the ball dragged the remaining soldiers with minor injuries into a covered area while swaying from side to side.

Right after all the wounded soldiers were transferred, the enemies launched their second attack.

Five or six bone spears pelted down at tremendous, lightning-like speed, and shot at the ball. Van'er could clearly see the spot where the head of the spear landed ripple as if the surface of the ball were a thick body of water. As the ripples split, overlapped and rushed forward, the ball started to tremble as though it would burst at any moment. However, the bone spears were stopped several meters above the ground.

"Good job." The blue-haired witch withdrew her ice and looked at Van'er. "It's safe here for now. You can retreat with your people."

"No, there's something I haven't done yet." Van'er grounded his teeth, forcing himself to get up. "I have to make these damn monsters suffer before I go."

There was only one last step left.

Van'er shambled to the Longsong Cannon, limping. He picked up the matchlock and pulled toward him with all his strength!

The scorching air around the muzzle soon cleared sky. The battlement, after 15 minutes of silence, was once again filled with thunderous roars!

Chapter 985: The Shadow of the Dragon

As more and more Mad Demons and Devilbeasts were eradicated, they gradually recovered control over the chaotic situation.

Agatha walked around the artillery battalion and found the ground littered with the broken limbs of giant monsters. She had to admit that in a close-range hand-to-hand battle, nobody could ever parallel the God's Punishment Witches. Their fighting capacity was absolutely phenomenal, and it was even greater when they were equipped with the new firearms invented by His Majesty. Had the Witch Union not received their support, they would probably have struggled to fight off these 30 Devilbeasts and certainly would not have had time to watch out for the Mad Demons flanking from behind.

Nevertheless, it appeared that the God's Punishment Witches still preferred traditional combat methods over the large-caliber grapeshot guns to enact their vengeance. On more than one occasion, Agatha had witnessed an ancient witch give her opponent a final blow with a sword or even her fist after the latter was left sprawling on the ground under the bombardment of the firearms, as though they could only find solace in being bathed in the blood of the demons.

It seemed that 400 years of waiting had changed many things.

Perhaps the demons also had a difficult time understanding why they were being flattened by a group of ordinary men, who apparently possessed far greater physical strength and speed than them. Horrified by the unexpected circumstances, the last two Mad Demons, who were caught off guard by Breeze, pretty much stopped resisting in the end. Meanwhile, Breeze also impaled another demon who came to rescue his peers.

Presently, the substitute artillery battalion joined the battle. Four more cannons that had previously been tipped over by the

Devilbeasts were once again erected upright on the battlefield and were soon back to normal operation. At the same time, the first Longsong Cannon that had restored its service thundered continuously, further raising the morale of the soldiers.

"How many enemies left?" After everybody gathered around, Agatha asked Zooey.

"16 if they have no further reinforcements." Zooey cast a glance at the sky. "The flying Devilbeasts suffered a loss of about 70% of their numbers. Whatever their original intention was, they've lost. But they still refuse to leave, which signals that they must be preparing for a final attack."

"A final attack?" Agatha knitted her brows.

In order to stay away from the storm of machine gun bullets, the rest of the demons all rose somewhere higher, even beyond the range of their spears. It would definitely be trickier and more dangerous for them to approach the fortifications on the ground a second time. More importantly, the army on the ground was now fully prepared for any upcoming strike. Even if there was another round of a spearing attack, the soldiers were confident in minimizing the losses. Since a defeat was certain, the demons should have been thinking about how to retreat rather than putting up a desperate struggle.

"You used to be a member of the Quest Society and rarely participated personally in open combat, so you might not know much about their operational style and behaviors," Zooey explained heavily. "A fully grown flying Devilbeast is very precious to the demons. Only a commander-level demon is entitled to so many flying Devilbeasts at a time. For this type of demon, completing missions is their top priority. They would rather be killed in a battle than retreat upon failure."

"If so, why didn't this commander come down in the first place?" Breeze couldn't help asking.

"Because he didn't find a rival worthy of his attention." A strange smile fluttered over Zooey's face. "If there was an Extraordinary among us, he would have come down to challenge her long ago."

"Why?"

"It's probably in their nature." Zooey rested her eyes back again on the sky. "They're ferocious and barbarous creatures who enjoy slaughter. Although they've been gradually bearing an increasing physical resemblance to mankind, they're still nothing but animals... It was thanks to this violent nature that Lady Natalia and the Queen of Starfall City got so many opportunities to fight against senior Magic Slayers and finally elevated themselves to Transcendents."

In other words, the enemy was too proud to launch an attack at an opportune moment, yet had too much honor to desert his post when faced with defeat. Agatha was not sure whether Zooey's assumption was correct. However, she was certain that the latter was not any ordinary witch since she even knew details of how two of the Three Chiefs had been promoted.

Agatha asked, "Who were you... in the Union Age?"

"Miss Pasha didn't tell you?" Zooey smiled faintly. "I was one of Lady Natalia's personal guards, and I was also known as the 'Red Lotus' amongst the Blessed Army."

The Ice Witch instantly remembered the title. If Agatha had been the youngest senior witch, the most widely recognized genius researcher in Taquila, then Red Lotus could have been regarded as the most promising and powerful Extraordinary, and was the most likely to succeed Natalia.

Unfortunately, the Union had fallen apart before that time could come.

If Agatha remembered correctly, she and Red Lotus should have been of the same age.

However, Zooey was currently not in any way similar to the person she remembered.

Time had reshaped her character and turned her into a completely different person.

"They're coming." Agatha was still lost in thought when Zooey reminded her. "You go protect those fragile mortals. We'll take care of these enemies."

As if corroborating Zooey's statement, Sylvie's voice suddenly popped up from the Sigil of Listening. "Oh heavens, what's that? Agatha, watch out! There're multiple magic reactions among the enemies!"

Theoretically, each witch could only have one Magic Cyclone, whereas demons utilized embedded Magic Stones to apply their power. Therefore, demons could have more than one cyclone. The Union referred those demons with more than one cyclone as Senior Demons. They might vary a lot in terms of strength and fighting capacity, but all of them were, unequivocally, hard nuts to crack.

"Any problems there?" Breeze asked apprehensively.

"Oh, no need to worry," Zooey replied slowly. "The Queen of Starfall City might have selected the wrong path, but there was something that she was right about. The God's Punishment Witches are designed to battle Senior Demons."

Just at that moment, a shadow suddenly leaped out of the clouds and dashed toward the artillery!

Following the shadow, the other hovering Mad Demons all started to dive to the ground. Although the machine guns directly below them could not really aim at the descending demons due to the restrictions on the shooting angles, the anti-air emplacements placed around them did not have any such difficulties in shooting down the enemies. Several demons were shot down on their way,

despite their attempts to dodge the projectiles by zigzagging through the bullet rain.

This time, the opponents aimed their spears at the anti-aircraft machine guns next to the Longsong Cannons.

Beyond a doubt, their intention was to clear the way for the shadow figure so that it could reach the core of the artillery battalion.

While Agatha was assisting the soldiers in defending against the pelted bone spears, she also noticed in surprise that the object that was plummeting like a meteorite was a colossal Devilbeast even bigger than Maggie. Its wings and abdomen, all armored in black, gleamed like a lusterless crystal. Even its head and horns were sharper than those of normal Devilbeasts, making it resemble the "dragons" of legends at the first glance.

When the "dragon" landed, the earth trembled. The air was saturated with ashes and dust that blinded people's eyes.

Immediately after landing, the Devilbeast opened its huge crimson mouth, producing a long, loud belch...

A burly black-armored demon crept out of the Devilbeast's wet throat and presented himself in front of everybody.

Chapter 986: Fiery Red Lotus

Although there were ominous magic reactions appearing at the rear of the encampment, Sylvie could not afford to dawdle.

After giving the witches stationed there a hasty warning, she diverted her attention back to the Army of Demons a few miles away to the north while monitoring the battlements around her at the same time.

There loomed something she had never seen before, so menacing and wicked that she didn't know whether it should be classified as a living being or an inanimate object.

It was as big as a two-story building, its appearance resembling a reptile in the shape of a crab or a spider, although its torso and limbs were constituted of gleaming black stones. There was a twinge of stiffness in its movement. While its fellow demons were being blasted to smithereens under the heavy musket fire, this monster moved forward while being completely indifferent to them, almost like the machines invented by Roland.

But it was not a machine in a real sense.

Sylvie could spy some wriggling living tissue underneath its sturdy, thick shell, where a magic glow infiltrated the whole organism through numerous intertwined veins.

She could only associate it with the word "parasite".

A living being nestled inside a mass of stone and metal.

Suddenly, the horrid "Siege Beast" no longer seemed so fearsome when compared to this crawling monstrosity.

Fortunately, the monstrosity was not invulnerable.

The First Army could still cause it harm without directly hitting it. A cannon shell that landed in the vicinity of the monster would still be sufficient to damage its legs and thereby paralyze its

movement.

Yet there were just too many demons around the monster. Although Sylvie had been continuously giving firing instructions to the artillery, it was hard for them to accurately direct the shells. Each shell had to travel several miles before it landed at the targeted spot. By the time the Devilbeasts had broken through and raided the artillery battlements, only one out of the five crawling monsters had been stopped.

While a bitter battle was going on at the rear, Sylvie was concerned about the front.

The artillery battalion had probably not realized how big a threat they had become for the demons.

In fact, among all the people who were participating in this war, Sylvie was the only person who witnessed the great damage caused by the Longsong Cannons. When a pack of demons swarmed in, that terrain eight miles away instantly became a slaughterhouse where the hordes of demons were mercilessly butchered.

Every time a shell landed, pillars of earth rose 10 meters high and broken limbs were scattered into the air. Metal shrapnel and sharp stone fragments flew in the air, penetrating the enemies' armors made of animal skins and bones. The thick body of the Mad Demons thus became ragdolls filled with shrapnel. Dozens of demon corpses lay sprawled on the ground in the vicinity of the crater after each bombardment, their magic blood blossoming and soaking the soil underneath.

Not all the shells successfully hit the demons, but it only took the artillery three rounds of firing to break their formations. Although the demons were dispersed, from the stiff manner with which they ran, one could tell they were stressed out by these unprecedented, lethal weapons.

Had the Devilbeasts not interrupted their firing, the artillery would have annihilated all the demons already.

Even though the artillery team had later restored the cannons, their firing accuracy and speed were greatly compromised. The demons had taken this opportunity to advance. By the time Sylvie spotted the multiple magic reactions at the rear, the main force of the enemies was only two miles away from the defensive line.

Now, the soldiers at the front should have been able to see swarms of demons coming up over the horizon with their naked eyes.

Sylvie alerted Shavi at the front as planned.

"The enemies are within the shooting range of the mortars."

"Got it. I'll let the commander know," Shavi soon replied. "By the way, how are things going at the rear? Have they not finished those flying demons yet?"

"Something... unexpected happened," Sylvie answered hesitantly. "But I gather it should be all right now."

"If Andrea was here, we would have finished them already, wouldn't we?"

"Well... perhaps." Sylvie decided to hold back on mentioning what she had seen so as not to let Shavi worry too much. While they were talking, Sylvie suddenly noticed that the four crawling monsters among the Army of Demon had stopped advancing.

They all threw themselves to the ground.

What're they planning on doing?

Sylvie immediately found out the answer. She saw the back shell of the monster fly open, ejecting a cylinder that looked like a black crystal. The cylinder was as wide as a man, its surface slimy as if it had been grown out of living tissue. Like the crawling monster, the cylinder was also filled with tons of veins and blood vessels. It contracted and expanded as the magic power within moved about.

The next moment, the magic cyclone inside the monster started

to spin and emanate a dazzling glow.

In an instant, the black crystal cylinder was thrust forward by a great force. It whistled above the demons and bolted toward the Northbound Slope like a magnified arrow!

At the same time, the mortars of the First Army produced a tumultuous roar...

Over 100 shells soared, tracing parabolic curves in the air. Pulled by gravity, the shells zoomed toward the scuttling demons.

For a split second, the shells and the cylinder brushed passed each other. The two powers, human and demon, had once again clashed after 400 years of peace.

"Shavi, shield!" Sylvie cried at the top of her lungs.

At these words, the bulky cylinder reached the defensive line.

With a flash, the whole cylinder exploded. The crystal burst into numberless needles glinting in blue blood, and they rained down upon the soldiers waiting below.

...

The battlement was deadly silent at that moment.

Agatha and the other witches immediately drove the artillery team away from the giant monster, leaving behind only the anti-aircraft machine gun squad to battle the last few Devilbeasts. Soon, there were only a dozen God's Punishment Witches and the armored Senior Demon on the battlefield.

The Senior Demon surveyed everybody coldly and suddenly let out a long wail even louder than the distant thunder of the machine guns. Everybody could perceive the extreme anger in his voice.

He then reached out his right hand and threw it up in the air. Soon, a flash of light escaped from his palm. Instantly, a crackling long sword appeared in his hand!

The Senior Demon then swung the sword at the Longsong Cannon. With an earth-shattering crack, the iron cannon split in half. The cut surface was a bright red color as though it had been heated to a high temperature.

The Ice Witch held her breath, realizing that the sword was powered by magic!

But Zooey remained undisturbed. "So what? Are you not happy about your enemies? You came down to have a final battle against your enemies only to find that your opponents are a group of mortals, and so now you're disappointed?" A thin jeer played about her lips. Zooey's tone was indifferent and even a bit derisive, but her eyes were on fire. "You made the biggest mistake of your life in coming down here. If you had stayed above, you would have probably gotten to live a bit longer. Now, you'll understand how furious we have been over the past 400 years. Compared to us, your rage is frivolous!"

Although they could not communicate, both parties were able to discern the attitude of the other. The demon threw the sword of magic at Zooey while howling, and the sword cut through the air like a dazzling thunderbolt!

Meanwhile, the two God's Punishment Witches beside Zooey drew close, and all three of them spread their God's Punishment Areas!

A strange force suddenly distorted the space around the witches. The blinding flash of the sword was engulfed by a fathomless darkness and vanished into the thin air as if the thunderbolt had hit nothing!

The Senior Demon stood there blankly gaping.

While he was in a daze, the other two God's Punishment Witches raised the large-caliber grapeshot guns.

The battlefield was immediately saturated with the crackling

sounds of gunshots. The demon shielded himself with a cloud of blue light, but the light was extinguished in a second.

Even the gleaming black armor could barely protect the demon.

As the shots continuously hammered the Senior Demon, his body twisted like a rag. By the time the firing had finished, the demon's inner organs and bones had turned into a bloody pulp.

Chapter 987: A Duel

Watching its master prostrate to the ground, the giant Devilbeast flapped its wings, attempting to escape. It had realized that the circumstances have changed in a direction it did not foresee.

There were few Devilbeasts left on the battlement that it could use as a diversion to help it escape. As the Devilbeast climbed up, its gigantic body had weighed it down, slowing its ascent. Its decision to take flight was actually incorrect because if it continued to remain on the ground, the machine gun squad would hesitate to fire, fearing they would hit their peers by mistake. However, if it rose to the air, they would not have such scruples.

For a second, most of the anti-aircraft machine guns on the campground were aimed at the giant creature.

Bullets lashed at the Devilbeast, submerging it. The sparks flickered off its armor, its flesh was exposed and torn to pieces. It plunged to the ground and gave a desperate screech. Putrid blood streamed from the numerous bullet holes and pooled under its body.

Pasha let out a long sigh.

Zooey was right. The God's Punishment Witches were truly a great threat to Senior Demons. No wonder so many people in the Union had taken the side of the Queen of Starfall City.

A God's Punishment Witch could block magic power and reduce the strength of enemies who carried multiple magic stones to their level. At the same time, their power rivaled an Extraordinary's. Thus, the creation of God's Punishment Witches could not only steady the fluctuating magic power within a witch but could also make them unrivaled when outnumbered by demons. Back then, this strategy was undoubtedly a ray of hope to the routed Union.

Based on Lady Alice's initial plan, thousands of witches would

have become first-class warriors if half of the non-combat witches were converted to God's Punishment Witches. The overall tactic of the Empire's final battle was to allow the combat witches to deal with the Army of Demons, the God's Punishment Witches to deal with the Senior Demons, and the Transcendents were left with the most difficult enemies.

Since the God's Punishment Witches were primarily designed to exterminate demons, it was not surprising that they could kill a Senior Demon in such a swift manner. In other words, if God's Punishment Witches were so weak that it cost 10 of them to take out one Senior Demon, the Queen of Starfall City would have never bet on this plan.

However, everything was just a little too late.

Glancing at Zooey who looked content and delighted, Agatha had mixed feelings.

Had the Union implemented that plan at the very beginning, the outcome of the second Battle of Divine Will would probably have been very different. Although the humans had been forced to retreat to the Land of Dawn, there were thousands of cities and towns still erected on the Fertile Plains with a total of nearly 10 million people living. The Union could have definitely built an army as powerful as the demons' from this huge population.

But when they lost the Battle of Divine Will, the Queen of Starfall City had barely held any lands. All she had left was less than a million barbarians. This plan was thus considered her last attempt to survive the war.

"Did you kill it?" asked Agatha as she walked up to Zooey.

The seriously injured Senior Demon was not completely dead yet. These grisly enemies were sometimes even more resilient than Transcendents. Even without a Stone of Measuring, Agatha could still observe the little remains of magic power in the demon run wild. Apparently, the latter was trying to fix its deteriorating body.

Nonetheless, this did not mean that demons were immortal. They had a self-repairing limit. Even if Zooey did not give it a final blow, the demon would eventually die when it exhausted its magic power.

It would also die when the Red Mist ran out.

Perhaps Zooey preferred to give her enemy an excruciatingly painful death rather than a quick one.

"I want to let him live for a bit longer." Zooey's answer surprised Agatha. "There are many demons this time. We should be able to obtain a lot of mist storage tanks from them. Treat his wounds and provide him with some Red Mist. He should be able to live for another few days."

"What are you going to do?" asked the Ice Witch with as she scowled.

"Rest assured. Although I really do want him to suffer eternal torment, I'm aware that this isn't the time to take personal revenge," said Zooey solemnly. "If I remember correctly, there's a witch in another unit who can link two individuals?"

"Do you want her to link the demon?" asked Agatha in surprise.

Zooey nodded. "I know its certainly risky, but if we succeed, we'll have an opportunity to confront the demons directly. Since he's a commander, it's worth taking a little bit of risk to pry into his mind!"

If it were in the age of the Union, the executives would have found it hard to resist such a tempting suggestion. However, the Union had fallen apart a long time ago. She believed neither Roland nor Tilly Wimbledon would agree to force a witch to venture for something so dangerous.

Unless Camilla Dary volunteered herself.

While Agatha was hesitating, she heard several loud bangs at the other end of the battlement.

From where she stood, Agatha could see clouds of ashes spring up in from the northern front. It was as if something had just swept over the field.

But she did not hear any intense gunshots.

"Is there another group of Devilbeasts? Or has the demons broken through the defensive line?" Agatha wondered.

She immediately activated the Sigil of Listening and inquired about the situation. "What's going on at the front line Sylvie?"

"A monster we've never seen is attacking us." Sylvie's voice from the other end of the line sounded pretty anxious. "We require the assistance of the Longsong Cannons!"

...

The moment the cylinder blasted, shells from the mortars landed among the Army of Demons.

Since the Mad Demons were all wearing animal bones and leather jackets, both the mortars and the 152-caliber howitzers could seriously injure them. In fact, the mortars were more lethal as they were faster and greater in number.

Flying bullets and shells streaked across the air on the battlefield, killing the demons as they sprinted without cover. The explosions created blood mist clouds, as the soldiers continuously fired. Finally, the enemies stopped their advance.

Sylvie did not really pay attention to the outcome of the battle.

Apart from occasionally monitoring the enemies in the air, her full attention was mainly on the four sinister crawling monsters.

Unfortunately, the mortars were not much of help against these monsters made of black stones and metals.

Bullets could barely penetrate their shells unless they were hit directly in the face.

Suddenly, the crawling monsters ejected a black stone pillar. To

her dismay, Sylvie noticed that the pillar was actually a part of these monsters. The stones and its veins gradually peeled off and combined, forming a new cylinder.

Sylvie knew that they had to eliminate these enemies who were capable of launching long-distance attacks as soon as possible.

Its first attack had caught everyone off guard, resulting in a significant loss among the First Army. More than 100 people at the front were injured. Furthermore, some of the soldiers in the trench were shot in their shoulders and chests. More importantly, the failure to develop any effective countermeasures to this unheard-of attack had greatly impacted the morale of the soldiers.

Luckily, the monster "grew" much slower than soldiers loading their cannons.

"The Artillery Battalion are currently trying their best to re-set the Longsong Cannons." Agatha's voice calmed Sylvie down. "I'll connect you to the battalion commander."

"H-hello... Miss Sylvie." The commander sounded a bit nervous. "I'm Van'er, the commander... It'll take a while for us to fully restore the operation of the Longsong Cannons. Fortunately, one cannon wasn't affected. If you could tell me the shooting parameters, I can arrange people to support you right away."

Sylvie clenched her fist, trying to suppress her excitement. She cast a glance at the compass in front of her and slowly pronounced her position. "10' 17" to the north, 2,310 meters away, please fire!"

"Copy that. 10' 17" to the north, 2,310 meters away." Van'er repeated. "Sixth squad, fire!"

Chapter 988: The First Victory on the Plain

The No. 6 Longsong Cannon was the one Van'er inspected prior to the attack. It was located at the far end of the battlement. Although it had received two rounds of spears, it was practically unscathed compared to the cannons the Devilbeasts tipped over. Once the soldiers were back in action, it could resume its function.

A minute after Van'er received the parameters, the Longsong Cannon ejected flames in the given direction!

As the target was two kilometers away, the trajectory of the shell was quite low. Both the soldiers and demons had heard the bullet's whooshing as it whistled pass.

The only difference was that the demons heard an earsplitting thunder right after!

The formidable lord of war had been revived!

Due to the short distance between the large-caliber cannon and the enemy, its firing accuracy had significantly improved. The first shell had landed right beside the crawling monster. It generated a shockwave which flipped the monster's colossal body over, blowing away its shell and exposing the flesh underneath.

The group of Mad Demons which happened to be beside the crawling monster were killed along with it.

From the Mad Demons' positions, one could tell that they were deployed at that location to prevent a raid from the witches. Unfortunately though, they were deterred by the mortars. Left with no choice, they hid beneath the "giant spider", taking refuge from the flying shells behind its stone limbs.

Nonetheless, this act was pointless. They had still suffered from blast waves which transmitted through the crawling monster.

The shockwaves completely crushed the Mad Demons' inner organs and bones as it rippled through their bodies. By the time

the scene became tranquil, the explosions were replaced with littered demon bodies.

"We made it!" Sylvie exclaimed as she swung her fist. "The next target is... 12' 6", 2,480 meters from here!"

"No problem. Will be ready in a minute!"

Meanwhile, the demons who endured the pain of constantly being blasted by the mortars were finally within one kilometer of the battlement.

Just when everyone thought it was time to battle, the enemies had suddenly stopped.

The whole process was less than 10 minutes.

The Mad Demon at the very front had approached within 500 meters of the Northbound Slope where the first line of barbed wire stood.

But he moved no further.

Without the interference of the Devilbeasts, all the machine gun squads, including the anti-aircraft machine gun squad, aimed at the enemies who swarmed in.

The whole battlefield stirred up.

The First Army's equipment was currently much better than when they had fought at Coldwind Ridge. Back then, HMGs were deployed in the blockhouse with great caution due to its limited number. They were used exclusively for attacking targets that posed the biggest threat. Now, the First Army no longer had any restrictions on their access to firearms and were allowed to shoot enemies at any distance. However, such an "unscrupulous" usage of ammunition was very likely to be a one time offer only.

The area within 500 meters of the trench became the hunting ground of the sniper team.

Usually, the demons would not have any difficulties getting

through the barbed wire as they could easily jump over the fence or uproot the wooden poles.

But since their opponents were a group of top-notch snipers, these actions would be very bold and stupid to do.

When the demons found out that they could not close-in to the spearing range, they went wild. This action was not a form of military discipline or a display of soldiers' morale, it was more like the desperate struggle cornered beasts.

After thousands of demons died around the defensive line, the enemies started receding quickly. During the whole process, the First Army's machine guns had never stopped firing. The barrels had turned completely red hot.

Compared to the intense fight at the rear, the front seemed to be relatively placid.

Sylvie finally felt relieved. She was perhaps the only person who understood the graveness of the situation when the "duel" between the two parties started. The last two crawling monsters had their magic spirals filled with magic power and were just about to strike. At the same time, the No. 1 and No. 3 Longsong Cannons were just fixed and had thus saved everybody.

Had it been two or three seconds later, the stone pillar would have caused more substantial injuries to the First Army.

Nevertheless, human beings had won the battle. Mankind were once again setting foot on this long-forgotten land. They had finally defeated the demons for the first time in 400 years.

...

Roland received the detailed report four days later.

Due to the large number of the dead bodies, it took the First Army a considerable amount of time to clean the battlefield. Based on the instructions from the Taquila witches, they had to first burn the demons' bodies before taking away their magic stones.

Collecting magic stones was particularly important. The battle did not technically end until they had stripped the demons of the magic stones. If demons, by some means or another, retrieved these magic stones, they would soon recycle it by using it on new demons.

The final result was astonishing. There were around 6,000 demons killed in action, more than the total number of the First Army who had participated in the war.

Less than half of the demons were directly killed by machine guns or cannons. Most of them had died on their way as they ran out of Red Mist.

However, this did not mean that the demons were not fully prepared for this war. During the post-war clean-up, the First Army had found dozens of Siege Beasts that had been transformed into transportation tools. This number had not even included those blasted to pieces. The demons could have slowly recharged the mist tanks if the human beings had been in a disadvantageous position. However, their swift defeat had completely sabotaged this plan. It was impossible for the demons to retreat to the Taquila ruins from their outpost by relying on the meager amount of Red Mist they carried on hand.

"If I remember correctly, witches can also control those Siege Beasts, right?" Roland asked through the Sigil of Listening.

"That's right. Those beasts are essentially magic stones. With just a little bit of training, witches can also handle them." Zooey cut in. "Although they're a bit slow, they can carry lots of things. The Union used to use them for long-distance transportation instead of regular mules and horses."

Roland thought it would be a good idea to have them managed by the Ministry of Construction as the construction team was currently in need of some transportation tools. For city transportation, the slow speed was actually preferred.

Although there were tons of Magic Stones of Tossing, it was a shame they were of little use. These stones were exclusive to demons because they could only exert their power when connected to a magic being. Thus, the First Army could only collect these stones together and destroy them.

"By the way, how did the enemies escape Sylvie's surveillance?"

"Let me answer that for you," said Agatha as she cleared her throat. "After the battle ended, we searched the entire outpost and found an underground tunnel connecting to a cave two kilometers away. In the cave, we discovered an underground campsite built by the demons where not only was there a mist storage tower but also a God's Stone of Retaliation Pillar. The campsite was even larger than the outpost itself. This was their real stronghold. We were indeed all deceived."

Roland drew his brows together and asked, "A God's Stone of Retaliation that covers the whole campsite?"

"Correct," Agatha said slowly. "It's nearly five meters in diameter and 10 meters high. The surface is as smooth as a clean-cut icicle. I've never seen something like that before, not even back in the Union age. If I didn't see it myself, I would have never believed it."

Chapter 989: After the War

Roland certainly did not think that the demons had possessed such incredible power 400 years ago. Otherwise, the Witch Empire would have been eradicated from the Earth within a year or two. The truth was, however, that they had ruled the world for a short decade.

After all, it was impossible to compete against the demons with only a few Extraordinaries. Once every outpost was protected by a similar God's Stone of Retaliation, the witches would have no chance of survival.

Roland knew how hard it was to carve out such a giant God's Stone of Punishment Pillar. The better the condition of the original stone was, the greater durability it had. They had tried to dig out the Natural God's Stone from the bottom of the North Slope Mine by shooting at it at close range but had only ended up leaving a few white marks on its surface. The only way to recover the stone was to corrode its surface with magic blood before processing it. Due to the great difficulty in obtaining them, large God's Stones were particularly expensive.

Nevertheless, even the God's stone in the main hall of the Hermes Cathedral was not that enormous. According to the Ice Witch, it seemed that the pillar had been directly cut out of a Natural God's Stone by some sharp weapon. There were only two explanations for this: Either the demons had acquired some astonishing carving skills or they had developed a more profound understanding of their magic power.

For mankind, neither of them was good news.

"We can tell from the demons' new weapon that they have also been busy over the past 400 years..." Roland tapped the desk. "The third Battle of Divine Will is probably going to be tougher than we anticipated."

Roland's worst fear had come true. Compared to the demons back in the age of the Union, the demons nowadays were not only more cunning but also more advanced in terms of their technology. For example, they had created a hybrid life form such as that crawling monster, which was seemingly used to kill regular combat witches. As the crawling monster can shoot the witches from two kilometers away, the witch army would have no time to use their power to fight back when they realized they were under attack.

Even a scout like Sylvie would find it hard to protect her peers when the enemies started mass shooting because her ability was only effective within a radius of five meters.

"As much as I hate to admit it, the demons do evolve faster than us." Zooey broke the silence. "If this happened in the Union Age, we would have probably been squashed already."

Roland could easily imagine how slim the witches' chances of survival would be in this situation. They would be double teamed and outnumbered by the Mad Demons on the ground, threatened by the Senior Demons lurking in midair, and also attacked by the destructive new monsters, the witches would be doomed to fail.

The current problem was whether the five crawling monsters were the only ones in possession of the demons or just a very small part of their advance force. Had demons developed any war weapons other than those crawling monsters? If they had, what would they look like and how were they going to deal with them?

Roland needed all of this information right away.

Next came the casualties of the First Army.

Roland already had a rough estimate of the number after the war. There were indeed few discrepancies between his number and the actual statistics obtained four days later. Without a doubt, the low casualty rate was largely attributed to Nana and Lily.

There were 190 people injured and 75 killed in action, and most of

the casualties were directly caused by the crawling monsters. It was impossible for the soldiers down in the trench to dodge the stone needles raining down from the sky. Once the needles had penetrated human bodies, they had, pretty much, nailed the people to the trench. In order to transfer the wounded to the shelter, the field medic must have had to pull the one-meter long needles out first. This operation had, consequently, resulted in a large amount of blood loss. Due to the mishandling, many soldiers had died within a few minutes.

Roland would certainly not blame the rescue team. In fact, it was the first time for the field medic to provide assistance to the war effort, and they had actually bought a lot of time for the wounded soldiers. As Nana was not able to treat so many people at a time, she had had to treat those who had suffered fatal injuries first, leaving those who had sustained minor injuries to the rescue team.

Roland could envision that as the war became increasingly intense, what Nana could do in the future would be increasingly limited. At the end of the day, the First Army would have to solve the medical problem themselves.

"Please bring the ashes of the soldiers killed in action back," Roland said in a low voice. "Graycastle won't forget them."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Iron Axe replied solemnly.

"So... do you have any plans for the First Army in the near future?" the Pearl of the Northern Region asked. "The enemies definitely did not anticipate such a great loss. According to Miss Lightning, the patrolling Devilbeasts near the Taquila ruins have reduced significantly. She only found demons more than 100 kilometers away from the ruins. Further, Miss Sylvie has also confirmed that except for the towering iron monsters, there are less than 1,000 specks of magic glow. In other words, the demons now have very few footholds on the Fertile Plains."

After a long pause, Roland made his decision. "Head back to

Neverwinter when all of the wounded recover."

"Are you concerned about the supplies?"

"If we can't seize the ruins, there's no point advancing to the north." Roland sipped the tea. "Plus... winter is coming."

Although the Months of Demons did not necessarily arrive during winter time, for people living around the Barbarian Land, winter meant endless snow and an overcast sky.

During the Months of Demons, the First Army not only had to deal with the harsh weather but also watch out for the demonic beasts that lurked everywhere. There was neither any guarantee that both food and winter supplies would be sufficient in Neverwinter, nor was there ample ammunition for the army to wage a multi-faceted war.

Hence, the winter in the Barbarian Land was always perilous.

By the time the ground was covered by thick snow, it would not be that easy to retreat.

"I see," Edith said. "The General Staff will collaborate with Mr. Commander-in-chief and work out a retreating plan."

"Safety is our top priority," said Roland. After he finished the "conference call", Agatha suddenly cut in.

"Your Majesty, there's another thing that you need to know."

"Really? What is it?"

"Well, the thing is that the Senior Demon defeated by the God's Punishment Witches is still alive..."

After hearing the full account, Roland was astonished.

"Is it fine to connect the demon with Camilla?"

The channeling would enable the channeling witch and the demon to share their minds and be fused into one. In other words, the witch would be able to learn what it felt like to be a demon

once the two were connected. It was definitely not going to be a pleasant feeling. The soul transfer of the Taquila witches had shown that any transfer would create confusion and that the process was irreversible. As such, it was certain that the clash of the two entirely different living beings would be a disaster.

This reminded Roland of the word "spiritual contamination".

"It's dangerous, so Zooey and I had a thorough discussion and came up with a relatively feasible way to do this."

Chapter 990: Behind the Soul

"What way?"

After a short pause, Agatha went on, "Since it's very dangerous to channel a demon, we're thinking of transforming the demon into a man."

"Are you suggesting... a soul transfer?" Roland asked as he realized the hint.

"You once said that there are demons in the Dream World. This shows that the successor of Starfall City has extracted a soul out of a demon before. At least, this tells us that demons would be affected by a soul device as well." Zooey explained. "We simply need to transfer the soul of the Senior Demon to a God's Punishment Warrior. This way, it would bear all the risks that occur during the transfer, such as sensory loss and disorientation."

"I see." Roland nodded. In other words, the demon would be perplexed by the spinning sensations while being forced to adapt to the foreign human body. During this time, the channeling witch could easily read its mind. Furthermore, the witch would be more familiar with the sensations of a human's body than a demon's one. The method sounded very promising, but Roland was concerned about another problem. He asked, "Has it occurred to you that you would lose a vacant God's Punishment Warrior if you carry out this plan?"

After the church fell apart, they could no longer receive new God's Punishment Warriors.

"Compared to a senseless life, we prefer to stay in your dream... So, that's fine with us," said Zooey.

"Ahem..." Roland almost choked on the tea. Although he knew Zooey was a woman, he felt goosebumps crawl up his bare skins when the actual words came from a man's body.

"Just joking." Zooey summoned up a rare smile. "In fact, there are quite a few defective bodies in our warehouse that we can use for this project. Plus, compared to the potential gain from this experiment, losing a God's Punishment Warrior is really nothing. We would like to make the small sacrifice."

"Defective bodies?" asked Roland after clearing his throat.

"It isn't actually easy to travel from Hermes to our hiding place, especially during the Months of Demons, because you have to climb over the Impassable Mountain Range. Some God's Punishment Warriors had indeed crawled there because their feet were eaten by demonic beasts. We surely can't use them to fight. Initially, we planned to offer them to nobles so that they could enjoy a life of immortality."

Roland twitched his lips, doubting if such a life would be truly an enjoyment.

"But even if they're defective, they should contain some power similar to a God's Stone of Retaliation. If the body releases its power during the experiment, wouldn't it cause problems?"

"That, you don't need to worry about. It took us decades to learn how to fully control a new body," Zooey replied, "and it took us even longer to successfully activate our God's Punishment Realm. A lot of people couldn't get the hang of it until they completed their second transfer. Even if the demon has some unusual talent in adapting to a new vessel, it isn't likely that it could do that during the interrogation."

Agatha added, "The worst scenario is the channeling being interrupted, but we've confirmed from Sylvie that the pain caused by such an interruption is just temporary."

"By the way, have you told Ms. Camilla about your plan?" asked Roland as he suddenly thought of a crucial problem.

"We have. She refused to do that at first, for this is something

she's never done before. No matter who the interrogator is, she has to take some risks, but Zooey persuaded her."

"Really...?" Roland was suspicious. Zooey was definitely not an eloquent person.

"It was actually very simple Your Majesty," Zooey explained. "I just told her that I'd be the person who would channel the demon."

Roland was a little surprised.

"I'm an Extraordinary and also the first awakened God's Punishment Witch... So, I'm the best person to channel the demon," she said nonchalantly. "After all, I proposed conducting this experiment, so I should be the person who bears all the risks."

Roland realized that this was probably the reason why he did not hate the ancient witches despite their astounding arrogance and haughtiness. They had greater courage than many people and were always the first ones to stand up to their enemies.

"I see, then do what you said." Roland gave his approval after a moment of silence. "Make sure that you keep an eye on the Senior Demon on the way back."

"Ah, I'll take 'very good care' of it Your Majesty," said Zooey with a smile.

Perhaps, Zooey was more interested in escorting the demon than interrogating it.

After the call, Roland sank into his thoughts.

Do men and demons really have souls?

If they don't, how did the Taquila Witches switch bodies freely? What is the mechanism of the soul device?

If they do, why can their souls be extracted and assigned arbitrarily to any vessels, but can't be completely independent of their bodies? Why aren't souls immortal?

Also the Dream World... Why does such a world which is

essentially a virtual space, look so real? How did it come into existence? According to the ancient book down in the ruins, the so-called light beams would lead to the Divine Domain. So, what would this Divine Domain look like?

Roland believed that he would not know the answers to these questions until he figured out the nature of both magic power and the Battle of Divine Will.

Regardless, he now had a chance to witness a soul transfer.

...

Time seemed to travel a lot faster compared to when they had left for the war.

Since City Hall was rapidly expanding and had gradually developed a mature and experienced workforce, there were fewer things that required Roland's attention. Therefore, he allotted most of his free time to several major industrial projects.

The pilot project for the glider was still in progress. The Aircraft Operation Manual drafted by Tilly, which initially contained only a few pages, soon turned into a big book as thick as "Intermediate Chemistry". When Roland added the cover to it, he had chosen gold as the font color.

Thunder had slowly gotten the hang of the steel ship. Although he had experienced quite a few mechanical breakdowns at the beginning, after several upgrades, the ship was finally ready to sail.

Furthermore, the construction of the Spellcaster Tower built specifically for Agatha had been completed in the last month of fall. This five-story concrete building had instantly become the new landmark of Neverwinter due to its peculiar architectural style and its extraordinary height. It was even taller than the lord's castle. Beyond a doubt, it would be the most conspicuous building in the city until the completion of the Miracle Building.

Apart from those mentioned above, the construction of the oil

fractionator and the new power engine assembling plant was also close to completion. Normally in the past, the whole Western Region would become quieter as winter drew closer, as if all the cities and towns had entered dormancy. However, ever since the establishment of Neverwinter, this was no longer the case. The city was particularly busy this year. There were crowds and newly-erected houses everywhere, from the North Slope Mining area all the way to the harbor at Shallow Beach. The hustle and bustle of the city impressed all the merchants who visited here.

A month and a half later, the First Army finally returned after a prolonged absence.

The residents in Neverwinter all greeted them at the meadow in the suburb. The cheers of the crowd were deafening.

On that very day, flurries of snows drifted down from the sky.

A long winter... was coming.

Chapter 991: Burdened by Destiny

After Zooey bid farewell to His Majesty, she led the God's Punishment Witches who were part of the expedition back to the Third Border City.

After she took care of the arrogant Senior Demon, she was guided by Alethea to a secret chamber in the deep underground, where Pasha and Celine were waiting as well.

Other than the captured demon, they were apparently more concerned about other matters.

"What do you think?" Shutting down the heavy Stone Gates, Alethea anxiously dropped in front of her. "Can we win?"

"Didn't we already win?" Zooey said matter-of-factly.

Alethea pointed at Zooey's forehead with her tentacles. "Don't tease me anymore. You know exactly what I'm talking about."

As she was the only Extraordinary of Taquila, she undoubtedly had a closer relationship with the Senior Witches than anyone else.

After the collapse of the Union, the ancient witches who survived began to follow the principle of "every witch is equally important," but the old class system still had some influence.

"Since she's so relaxed, I think it should be a good answer." Pasha smiled lightly.

"In fact... I'm not sure," said Pasha. Zooey also began to act more seriously after hearing Pasha's remark. "Nowadays, the demons are probably considerably different from the enemies we faced 400 years ago, not only in the use of magic but also in the varieties of species." She then elaborated on the entire battle process. "Arguably, Lady Alice's idea was correct, but according to her plan, mankind would inevitably fail."

Evidence has shown that the God's Punishment Witch was indeed a viable weapon for restraining the Senior Demon. Unfortunately, this weapon alone meant it would still be difficult to contend with the enemy on the battlefield— powerful armor did not indicate they would be spared injury. After being placed in front of the new war machines, the God's Punishment Witches' advantage would be formidable and impenetrable. Once they were at war, the plan of the Queen of Starfall City would lose its meaning.

After confirming this, Pasha seemed more relieved and looked as if a heavy burden had been lifted off her. "So that means we didn't follow the wrong leader— Lady Natalia's decision was correct. This is really great news..."

"Yeah, this is really great news..." Celine whispered. Her voice was faint and choking with emotion. This was an incredible thing for someone who had lived for more than 400 years.

But at this moment, Zooey empathized with the rest of them.

While the majority of the Union's leaders supported Alice, they stood by the Queen of Sunchaser due to their different ideologies. They were utterly torn apart by an unjust assault on the witch's empire that entirely destroyed the foundation of the Union.

Zooey would remember this scene till her dying day, when a severely hurt Blessed Army comrade lay dying in her arms and said, "You were the ones who ruined it all."

Since then, they have felt this huge burden in their hearts.

Death was nothing to be afraid of after all.

What was frightening was to be misunderstood and abandoned by their companions, while searching for a glimmer of hope in the dark.

If they failed in their mission, that would mean that they have destroyed the only way the witches would continue to survive. That kind of sin was unforgivable and could not be offset even by

death.

It was with this firm determination that everyone endured the unconscious shells and have persisted until now.

Now that Alice's plan has been proven to be wrong, they naturally felt a long-lost liberation—even if the final outcome were still the total destruction of humankind, the fate of the survivors would not be as critical.

"Even so, Lady Natalia was just on par with the Queen of Starfall City," said Alethea, rubbing her nose that had long since ceased to exist, "We have not yet won the final victory. It's too early to celebrate—"

"Don't worry. Now that you've become like this, even if you cry, no one can see it."

"Pasha!"

Zooey shook her head and smiled. "I haven't finished speaking yet... Although I can't say for sure who will win the Battle of Divine Will, at least I've seen some hope."

After hearing these words, the three Senior Witches became quiet.

In the 400 years of searching in the dark, hope was the most desired thing—No one knew whether the Chosen One really existed, but they had to continue searching. This kind of aimless confusion was always on their mind. The longer time passed, the more intense the suffering felt. In the beginning, people often discussed the abilities of God's chosen person and her apparent age and appearance. However, when "Black Money" was used to begin the search for the Chosen One, nobody dared to talk about it.

They feared creating a false image of the Chosen One as they would not be able to handle the disappointment when they'd find someone fitting their standards and having them turn out not to be the One.

Because of this, hope had become something of a luxury.

However, now they could say this word easily.

The ancient witch who realized this couldn't help but fall into a moment of silence.

After a while, Pasha broke the silence. "So... can we complete the task that Lady Natalia entrusted to us?"

"Entrusted?" Alethea was shocked. "Wait—we haven't even found the Chosen One yet!"

"I don't have an opinion," Zooey said with a shrug. "In the ancient books of the underground civilization, there was no rule stating that the key holders had to be male or female, right? After all, whether or not they had any concept of gender was still unknown."

Natalia had left behind a will that said, if they could find the Chosen One, then everyone should treat her as the chief, destroy the demons, and rebuild Taquila. Although the Five-Colored Stone reflected a Chosen One that was different from what they had imagined and could not activate the Instrument of Divine Retribution, it was consistent in dealing with the demon.

"I also... feel that there's nothing wrong with it." Celine was the last to speak. "The ancient books also did not specify that there should be only one candidate for the Chosen One. After we have discovered the newly selected witch, we can still change the candidate."

"Since you've all agreed... well then." Alethea sighed helplessly.

"Whether there will be a new candidate or not, we can forget about that for now. But I think it's unnecessary to change the candidate," said Zooey, looking at Pasha. "What you were once worried about has already started to happen."

"Did the witches exclude you in battle?"

"It wasn't that obvious." She told the story of Camilla again.

"After hearing that I would be the interrogator, she agreed to the request of connecting the demon's heart. This also shows that although she was concerned about the safety of the witches, that did not include immortal monsters like me."

"..." The atmosphere became a little intense. As early as a 100 years ago, Pasha mentioned this possibility. Although they considered themselves to be witches, the new generation of witches did not necessarily think so. Regarding appearance, characteristics or ability, there was no similarity between the two. They resembled neither witches nor humans. Roland Wimbledon, who was able to accept them so quickly, was more like an alien.

As the history of the Union gradually faded, the new Awakened ones might no longer see them as witches. And in an extreme scenario, to explore the mysteries of magic power and the techniques of the underground civilization, the witches might even use them as guinea pigs.

Although this idea was somewhat pessimistic, after centuries or even thousands of years, that could really happen.

When she heard Zooey's self-mockery, Pasha sighed. "I see, but I don't regret it."

Nobody answered, it was their choice as well.

"If we can accomplish the wishes of the Three Chiefs, our mission will come to an end," she paused and said, "what happens in the future is not something we can control... But at least for now we can plan a way out for ourselves."

"Should we hide in the mountains, disappear, or find a place to bury ourselves?" Alethea was displeased.

"Of course not," said Pasha, shaking her main tentacles, "we can be an indispensable force in the human kingdom."

Chapter 992: Future Direction

"You mean as God's Punishment Witches? The king who's a common person might not think so..."

"Power is not determined just by force," Pasha pointed toward Zooey and said, "Real strength lies in what influences the human kingdoms of today to change. This cannot be replaced and it's exactly where our strength lies."

"I see what you mean!" Celine exclaimed. "Compared to combat ability, this really is more important," she added as she came to the sudden realization.

"Hah..." said Zooey. "You can leave me out of it. This task would suit Faldi and the rest."

"Hey, what the h*ll are you talking about?" exclaimed Ellen in dissatisfaction. "Why couldn't I understand at all?"

"Pasha was talking about knowledge," said the youngest Extraordinary, "aren't there colleges, libraries and private scholars in His Majesty's Dream World already? Since everything in the Dream World comes from his memory, everyone should be able to learn... Compared to selective transcripts, it would obviously be better to fully absorb all that knowledge. As long as we allocate some time away from our leisure time, we could start learning the most basic information. It wouldn't take more than dozens of years and His Majesty would be able to have an additional group of helpers that can understand what he wants."

"The energy of common people will fade as their body ages, but we don't have to worry about this. A century's time would be enough to make a God's Punishment Witch His Majesty's heir. This is our greatest advantage." Pasha added, "Especially after he passes away. Only we know what the world will look like."

"If His Majesty Roland wants to continue his plans, then it can

only succeed through us—even if we weren't witches, we wouldn't be affected too much. In a certain way, it would be disadvantageous to us if there were any attempt to overthrow the will of His Majesty, but the Witch Union would certainly respond to that. On the other hand, if we're only in charge of knowledge, this would be good for any faction. Even if we don't possess combat strength, we'll still have force even if its very light-weight."

"Isn't this the Cloud School?" El grumbled.

According to legends, when most human beings were still ignorant, some sages came together to fan the flames of civilization. They taught people how to make ironwork, weave clothes, and tillage livestock until human beings populated the entire Land of Dawn. Hundreds of years later, they reached the summit of their power. All those in power sought to win them over by any means, and many members then turned from becoming knowledgeable communicators to being the private collection of those in power.

The leader of the sages discovered this point and moved the organization out to major city-states. He also stipulated that they should not be easily involved in politics, urging them to only focus on the mysteries of the world and uncovering the secrets of the ancient ruins. Since they were relocated to the top of a mountain covered by clouds all year round, everyone called it the Cloud School.

Although these people rarely interacted with the common people, their status was still elevated. No matter how the kings in power kept changing, they were still respectful to the Cloud School. Every year, they would send a large number of supplies and young students, just to get guidance from these sages.

But this period did not last long as the demon soon infiltrated mankind. The first Battle of Divine Will broke out... It was at this time that a disturbing rumor gradually spread. It stated that these brutal and terrifying beasts were introduced into the Land of Dawn

by a sage hundreds of years ago.

The reputation of the Cloud School plummeted, and it was taken over by the demons as no leader willing to lend a helping hand. Finally, it became a dusty memory of history books.

"At least we won't collude with the demon," said Celine defensively. "And the title of 'manager of knowledge' is not so bad. It's better than the titles that were set by the Quest Society."

"Anyway, this is only a preliminary direction. Any plans for the future can only be decided after the victory against the demons." Pasha said as she smiled and patted Celine's head with her tentacle. "Well, let's adjust the soul instrument. After the completion of the celebrations outside, we should also have finished our preparations here—I don't think His Majesty has the patience to wait until tomorrow."

...

When the residents of the city were still celebrating the victory, Roland had already entered Third Border City while leading the united front army.

He was certainly impatient.

If the demon city in the memory fragment was from hundreds of years ago, then the information stored in this Senior Demon's brain would be the latest intelligence about the enemy. Given the ineffectiveness of conventional intelligence channels for aliens, the significance of this opportunity was particularly important.

As soon as he stepped into the core area of the hall, he noticed something strange.

He saw that the Taquila witches lined up in a neat queue in the center of the hall with their leader the threefold original carrier Senior Witch.

The God's Punishment Witch placed her elbows at a level position and overlapped her fingers onto her chest, before bowing

to him.

It wasn't the first time that he had seen this strange manner of saluting as it was usually the special courtesy of the lower level witches to their superiors. However, before he even had the chance to ask questions, the three carriers also overlapped their tentacles in front of their bodies and fell to the ground. The voice of Pasha also rang in his head, "Thank you, Your Majesty. Taquila will always be loyal to you."

This made Roland somewhat surprised. The previous time she thanked him was probably due to the fact that there was a chance to defeat the demons and get revenge, but the meaning of the latter sentence was obviously different. Although the united front required all the coalition leaders to work for the leader, the other party's respectful behavior told him that these two were not the same thing.

He suddenly remembered that Senior Witches themselves were the upper class of the Union, and that they would only need to salute the three Transcendents in that manner.

Did this mean they considered him as one of the Three Chiefs in the Union?

Although he was not clear why their attitude had changed so much, after being in power for so long, he was still sensitive enough to know that now was not the right time to investigate.

Roland coughed twice and treated it like a normal greeting. "It's not necessary to thank me. This victory belongs to all the people present. By the way, how's the preparation for the Soul Transfer?"

"We can start at any time," Pasha pointed to a purple magic core behind her, "please come with me."

As he followed her down to the core, Roland noticed that there were two stone beds set up next to her. On the left bed, there was a male God's Punishment Army soldier with no feet. His hair was

gray and it was obvious that he had been transformed for a long time. The right bed had a figure that could not be described as human at all. Not only were the limbs missing, but even the black armor on its body was full of depressions. It was difficult to imagine it still being alive under such circumstances.

"Generally speaking, it would not be able to survive until now," explained Zooey, as if she had seen his doubts. "If Miss Nana's treatment was not available, it should have died the same day. In addition, Lady Agatha also helped a great deal, otherwise, we'd not have been able to conserve the Red Mist for so long. However, in order to prevent the Senior Demon from recovering on the road, a series of adjustments were needed. The result is what you can see right now."

"Adjustment?" Wendy said confusedly, "How?"

"It's very simple. As soon as it starts to come around, I would give it a stab. Thus, most of its magic would be consumed for self-healing. This was the first time that I had done such a job, so I'd almost caused it to stop breathing," said Zooey whilst stupefied.

In fact, it seemed that she was looking forward to this the most.

Sensing that the atmosphere was a little tense, Roland cleared his throat and said, "In that case, let's not waste time... We should start the transfer now."

"As you wish," Celine reached out with her main tentacle and inserted it into the core.

Chapter 993: Soul Interrogation (Part 1)

The magic core which was shaped like a giant spindle suddenly expanded while giving out a purple light. Its luminescence lit up the entire hall. It floated two meters above the ground and began to spin, looking like a fabulous merry-go-round.

Seeing this, Roland had to admit that the magic power, to a certain extent, could not be explained by physical concepts. After this skeleton structure automatically expanded, all its parts could somehow stay in the air without falling to the ground under the influence of gravity. It looked as if there was an invisible hand holding them together.

"How did the underground civilization create these things?" He looked at Pasha. "Can you make copies of them if I give you the same materials?"

"I'm afraid we cannot do so for now, Your Majesty." Pasha shook her head. "Although I'm reluctant to admit it, the underground civilization did have a deeper understanding of the magic power than the Union. Celine is already one of the best researchers of the Quest Society, but even she only learned to operate them in the past hundreds of years."

"We are short-handed. It's a major problem." Celine turned around. "We can't activate the magic core simply by injecting our magic power into it. We have to connect ourselves to the thousands of sensors in it. Common people can never do this."

"In other words, if I want to learn to use this magic core, I have to transfer my soul into an original carrier in the same way as you did?" Tilly asked.

"That's right. A summer insect never knows how cold the winter is. A deaf man never hears anything in the world." Celine sighed with profound resignation. "A human being can hardly imagine what I feel when I'm operating the magic core. I can't find an

appropriate word in the human language to describe this particular feeling to you either. Given that, now only Pasha and I can control a magic core."

"Wait... Do you mean that the main tentacle on you, which looks rough, is actually very sensitive?" Roland was surprised.

"Yes. Not only the main tentacles but also the other tentacles on us are highly sensitive," Celine confirmed. "They are able to smell and to feel cold and hot, wet and dry. They can sense even the slightest touch, and the main tentacles can even capture the flow of the magic power. So once you transfer your soul into a carrier, you won't be able to adapt to a human body anymore. Are you interested in it?"

"No, I was merely curious..." Roland turned his head away to stop the conversation. He had to clear his mind at such a crucial moment. He remembered that an original carrier's main tentacle was also her weapon and according to Phyllis, the carriers were as powerful as God's Punishment Witches regarding physical strength.

Based on what Celine had said just now, he realized that an ordinary man who was unable to sense the magic power could never study it in depth. Without a reliable observation and measurement method, this study could only be conducted by a few original carriers for now.

"No. 3 core has been activated in the Soul Instrument mode. The soul transfer is about to begin." Celine's voice interrupted his thoughts. Hearing this, Pasha and Alethea also inserted their main tentacles into the giant spindle apparatus.

Roland widened his eyes in fear of missing a single detail of the process.

However, this transfer process did not look as extraordinary as he imagined. Two beams of light shone out of the core and covered the two stone beds below. The magic power inside the skeleton

structure began to surge. After 15 minutes, Celine sighed of relief. "Well, we are lucky. The instrument has caught the demon's soul. Now, all we need to do is wait for it to enter the God's Punishment Warrior's body."

"That's it?" Roland blinked.

"Yes, in fact, the Soul Transfer is a process of exchanging Keys," Pasha explained. "If you had observed the process through a Five-Colored Stone, you would have been able to see the demon's beam of light move to the God's Punishment Warrior."

Before the ancient witch finished her sentence, the God's Punishment Warrior who had lied on the bed motionlessly suddenly opened his eyes!

His face was contorted and thus looked exceptionally ferocious. He could not stop shaking and his fingers, which looked like dead wood, twisted violently. Some weird sounds came out of his throat. Seeing this, all the witches around subconsciously took a step back.

"Don't worry. That's the normal reaction shortly after the soul enters into an unfamiliar body," Zooey said. "We didn't look any better when we transferred our souls into the God's Punishment Warriors for the first time. We can hardly eat or drink without someone else's help."

Roland pictured the scene: a group of exiled ancient witches kept fumbling around in a cold underground cave for a dozen years. He was deeply impressed by the willpower of the Taquila survivors.

"Now that the demon is panicking and in a confused state, it's time for us to get started, lady Camilla." Zooey glanced at everyone and continued. "No matter what you want to know, you can ask me directly. I'll repeat what I've heard from the demon." She paused. "And I have a request."

"Go ahead." Roland nodded.

"As long as I don't gesture a 'stop', please don't halt the Mind Resonance no matter what happens," Zooey stressed each word with due strength. "The interrogation is the most important thing."

"This..." Camilla Dary looked hesitant, which was a rare thing.

"I promise." Without any hesitation, Roland approved Zooey's request. Seeing her determination, he believed he did not need to worry too much, and he really wanted to respect her wish.

"If so, I'll start to use my ability now." Chief Butler of Sleeping Island looked at Roland profoundly and then put one hand on the shoulder of Zooey and the other on the shoulder of the God's Punishment Warrior.

The next moment, Zooey looked miserable.

It seemed that she could not stop herself from growling out. However, Roland immediately knew that this roar must have come from the demon and it might somehow be able to roar through the witch's mouth in the Mind Resonance.

"What have you done to me?" Zooey's voice sounded totally different now. "Stupid crawlers, low-grade species, let me go! Otherwise, I'll make this woman suffer!"

The witches could not help gasping. "Is Zooey..."

"Don't worry. The demon is just bluffing," said Anna, calmly. "Look at her finger."

At this moment, the others noticed that the God's Punishment Witch raised one finger and shook it with ease. Apparently, she was not controlled by the demon.

Roland quickly understood why she acted this way. In comparison to a question-and-answer method, letting the demon speak through her own mouth was a better approach since it would give the demon less time to think and prepare.

"You were defeated by us." Roland sneered. "If we are stupid crawlers, what about you?"

"I was... defeated?" Zooey's voice sounded much deeper all of a sudden. She seemed to be stunned and caught in agony. Roland could not tell whether the painful expression came from Zooey herself or the confused demon.

He did not want to give the enemy any chance to take a breath, so he continued to put pressure on the demon. "Yes, you got riddled with bullets, and your army was annihilated. Half of your soldiers were killed on the battlefield, and the other half failed to flee back to Taquila in the end. We burnt down thousands of them and destroyed your underground camp, so tell me who's the low-grade species!?"

Roland shouted out the last question to the demon.

"No, this is impossible, unless, unless..." Zooey shook her head violently. After a moment, she looked up and muttered in astonishment, "Did you get a legacy shard and upgrade your species? Did you create those weapons... based on the contents of the shard?"

Roland captured the keywords instantly. "What's a legacy shard? What do you mean by 'upgrade'?"

Chapter 994: Soul Interrogation (Part 2)

For a moment, Roland wanted to joke with the demon by saying, "You are also a member of Tadarin? Forgive me. I didn't recognize you." However, he gave up on this idea eventually.

After all, he came here to interrogate the demon. He did not want to undermine his own authority. In the state of Mind Resonance, the demon could manage to understand and speak the human language, but when it came across a word without counterpart in its own language, it would paraphrase the word. Given that, it might misunderstand or misuse the most common words in the human language.

Instead of answering Roland's questions, the demon rambled in agony.

"No, it doesn't make sense! You've never entered into the Sky-sea Realm, and you'll never be able to do so. How can you get a legacy shard? But if you don't have one, how come you can defeat me? You are lying. I, Kabradhabi will never believe you!"

As the demon's soul had been transferred into the God's Punishment Warrior, it could hardly control its own emotions during this moment. Before the interrogation, Roland had decided to grab this opportunity to delude the demon into leaking information which it would never mention under normal circumstances. He continued to push the demon. "Do you need more hints? You failed to lure my army into your trap and had to confront us on the battlefield, but before your army got close to us, they suffered heavy casualties. You led your troops to join the fight, wanting to revert this situation. As soon as you landed, however, you got shot down by the God's Punishment Witches. The fight between you and the witches lasted about ten seconds, and she's the one who led the witches to defeat you. Try to read her memory and then you'll see how vulnerable you appeared on the battleground."

"You—" Suddenly, the Senior Demon looked depressed.

Zooey interrupted the demon by showing it what had happened during the battle. It took her just a moment since the Mind Resonance significantly accelerated the pace of information exchange.

"You can't change the result of the battle by denying it, and your thought sounds ridiculous to me." Roland sneered. "We've never been to the Sky-sea Realm, so we can't own a legacy shard? I suggest we unify the concept first. If you don't tell me what a legacy shard is, how can I answer your question? Maybe in our eyes, it isn't a valuable thing at all."

"Stupid bug, you must be joking." Kabradhabi sounded very angry. "It's the cause of the Battle of Divine Will and determines the fate of the species. You think it's not precious!?"

Pasha suddenly thought of something. "Wait, does the shard look like a red crystal? Is it shaped like a spindle and able to bring anyone close to it into a spacious hall where he or she will see something incredible?"

"The relics of gods!" Tilly exclaimed in a deep voice.

"You call them the relics of gods? Sure enough, you are just low-grade crawlers," the demon responded scornfully. "They've nothing to do with deities. Each species has a shard like that. They can upgrade themselves by swallowing it, and once they lose it, they will become food for the other species. Now, do you realize how stupid you are? When those underground cowards died out, you still hid in a corner on the ground. How could you get their legacy?"

Hearing this, Roland's heart suddenly jumped. That's why it was so sure that human beings couldn't get a shard or a relic. The four picture scrolls represent four different civilizations. A civilization had to defeat another to obtain its legacy. During the first Battle of Divine Will, when the underground civilization was extinct, we

were busy fighting against demons. It's impossible for us to rob the underground civilization of its relic.

He looked around and found that everyone had a grave look on their face. Apparently, everybody realized that they had just heard important information.

First of all, what the demon said confirmed what the Taquila witches had thought about the relics. Roland still remembered that Wendy had exclaimed, "How come we've fought for hundreds of years just because of a useless stone? The Divine Will is so cruel." Now he found that a relic not only determined the survival of civilization but also had high practical value for another civilization. That meant no party in this battle would be willing to conciliate.

Secondly, according to Kabradhabi, demons had already upgraded themselves. Though it did not mention the specific process of swallowing a relic, it apparently attributed all the progress that a species made and the invention of new weapons, to the relic. Roland could not help wondering. Maybe, they can inherit the knowledge accumulated by another species by swallowing a relic. Given that, did they create the giant skeleton monsters and the strange demons based on the technology of the underground civilization?

This is incredible. Even the industrial revolution can't achieve this kind of effect. Such a revolution needs lots of raw materials and professional workers, and it only happens when there's an enormous technological breakthrough. In comparison, inheriting knowledge by swallowing a relic sounds like force transfer in kungfu fiction. A species will be extinct and lose everything to its opponent after losing its relic? If it's true, it's indeed a fearful secret.

No, it can't be counted as a secret. It's important news for human beings, but it won't affect the result of the Battle of Divine Will. For any party in this war, knowing the importance of the relics

won't guarantee the ultimate victory. Human beings have never had a proper idea about the relics until now. That's why we can't rally for the fight for the past thousands of years and lost again and again in the battles. Human beings can't compete with the other species depicted in the painting scrolls.

We've wasted too much time on in-fighting.

Roland's mouth went dry. He licked his lips and picked out the most crucial question among all the thoughts went through his mind.

"As you also refer to this war as Battle of Divine Will, do you believe that it's arranged by deities?"

"That's how you think of Divine Will?" The Senior Demon sounded much calmer this time, which was probably because it had remained quiet for a long time and had a chance to prepare during this period of time. "Well, it seems not bad to let you know the truth before you die out. Listen carefully, bugs. The battle has nothing to do with the deities. It's just among the civilizations. The final winner will be able to upgrade and open the door to the Fountain of Magic. When that happens, the winner will gain omnipotent power and his will become the Divine Will! But, forget about it, stupid crawlers. You'll never get such a chance. You are doomed to perish!"

"How do you know that?"

"What? Do you think that I, Kabradhab, will continue to talk to you?" The senior demon sneered.

"What do you mean?" Suddenly, Roland noticed something wrong and called out, "Zooey?"

"I'm afraid that this female can't hear your voice for the moment. You used a soul-transferring trick to confuse my mind and then used mind-reading ability to read my thoughts. Bugs, you really haven't made any progress for the past hundreds of years." Zooey

now sounded cold and heartless. "You dare to play magic tricks on me. You are headed for trouble. I'm Kabradhabi. Though I can't control this body, for now, that doesn't mean I can't use my magic power!"

"Camilla!" Roland shouted to Chief Butler of Sleeping Island.

"It's too late. Say goodbye to this female!"

With shrill laughter, Zooey closed her mouth. Camilla Dary went pale as if she could not believe what had happened. "The soul in the God's Punishment Warrior... disappeared!"

Chapter 995: Soul Interrogation (Part 3)

"What?" Everybody gasped in horror and simultaneously looked at Zooey. What Kabradhabi said did not sound like boasting. Since the God's Punishment Witch was connected to the demon by Camilla, the demon's soul that had disappeared must have sneaked into Zooey's body.

Alethea was the first one to take action. Whilst Camilla was crying out in alarm, she swung her main tentacle, which was strong enough to crush a Devilbeast, at Zooey. She spared no effort to press Zooey down to the ground and even the slate floor where the God's Punishment Witch landed got cracked.

Zooey spewed out a mouthful of blood and passed out.

The hall fell into silence.

Everyone in the hall understood that Alethea launched a sudden attack to prevent the God's Punishment Witch from causing damage; since the demon might be able to control Zooey through the mind connection. Once it managed to make the God's Punishment Witch spread an anti-magic area, no matter how small it was, it would cause significant harm.

This was particularly true for most of the witches, who were not prepared to treat Zooey as an enemy.

In comparison to those witches, Alethea, a former commander of the Blessed Army, was much more experienced in fighting.

She acted right after the demon blustered out its threat and did not give it any chance to react. Zooey was knocked down by Alethea's main tentacle and appeared like a dummy during the whole process. She did not fight back or struggle as the other witches had expected. It seemed that the demon failed to control the God's Punishment Witch successfully.

"Did the demon's soul really sneak into Zooey's body?" After a

while, Roland broke the silence.

"I've never encountered such a situation..." Camilla still looked frightened. "Mind Resonance is just a communication method. How come Kabradhabi could get out of its own body and enter into Zooey's body through the mind connection?"

"Are you sure?" Tilly frowned and asked.

"We can't be sure until Zooey takes the initiative to speak to us." Alethea loosened her grip on the God's Punishment Witch but still pinned her to the ground. "Souls can't survive without carriers, otherwise, we wouldn't have had to rely on these things left by the underground civilization. Although wiping out its soul in the process is a possibility; it's also possible that it was able to successfully transfer its soul into Zooey's body. We have to prepare for the worst."

"I think I've a way to figure it out." Roland thought for a moment. "If I bring Zooey's light beam into my Dream World..."

"I can't agree to that!" Wendy immediately interrupted. "Your Majesty, you should avoid taking risks as much as possible. Your Majesty's safety is of utmost importance!"

"Yes, I agree with Wendy. What if the demon manages to occupy your body?" Nightingale added. "It's a real Senior Demon, not some loser on the Soul Battlefield!"

"I can control the risk." Roland slowed down to consider his countermeasures. "If the demon goes into the Dreamland with Zooey, it'll appear at a certain place. As long as we send a group of God's Punishment Witches into the Dream World to help me, we'll be able to kill it before it adapts to the new world. More importantly, the Dream World is different from the Mind Resonance. No matter what takes place in that world, it'll never affect the real world. Once I wake up, the time in the Dream World will stop and all visitors will be forced out. Given that, even if Zooey's soul is replaced by the demon's, I'll be able to get a clear

idea of the current situation and come back safely."

"But..." Nightingale bit her lips and turned to look at Anna. "Come on, say something to persuade him."

"I agree with him," Anna said, which was totally beyond the other witches' expectations.

"Why?" Wendy and the other witches were stunned.

"Because he once did the same for me," Anna replied seriously. "If he had listened to the others and hadn't taken the risk to come to my rescue, I would have been hung a long time ago. I can't persuade myself to stop him from venturing to save Zooey. And I believe in his judgment. He knows that he isn't alone anymore."

She looked into Roland's eyes while talking and then they smiled at each other tacitly.

"..." Alethea remained silent for a long time. "I have to thank you on behalf of Zooey, regardless of the outcome."

"And I would like to hear Zooey express her thanks to me herself." Roland nodded.

"I'll go and pick out our most capable warriors," Pasha said gratefully.

"By the way, before we enter the Dreamland, please continue the Mind Resonance." He smirked. "Zooey asked us to keep the mind connection going until she gestures a 'stop'. If she's in a fight with the demon in the world of consciousness, she will probably win in the end."

"Hey, female, guess what your bug friends are going to do?"

Zooey raised her head to look at the Senior Demon and then looked at herself.

Her chest swelled slightly. Although she was still almost flat-chested, she thought this body looked much better than a rough

male body. She could clearly feel her own hands and feet again, but since she hadn't cut her hair for a long time, it covered her forehead now. She felt as if she had somehow entered the Dream World.

"Aha! They must think of you as an enemy and have you surrounded tightly." Kabradhabi mocked. "After they figure out what has happened, you've a 30% chance of being imprisoned. When that happens, you'll be tied to an iron bed and soaked in your own excretion like a dumb worm. Of course, you've a 70% chance of being executed right away too. After all, it's customary for you to sacrifice some of your own kind to prevent further losses; it's something you always did 400 years ago."

Zooey looked around and saw nothing except darkness. She wondered why she could see herself and the demon so clearly in such a dark place.

"Hey, did I scare you silly? Or, do you think that you can escape from this fight by remaining silent?" Kabradhabi sounded agitated. "My patience is limited. You'd better hurry up and understand the situation you're in. We won't die here, but if you devote all your energy to pleasing me, maybe I'll let you suffer less!"

"I've never expected a demon to talk such a load of crap before a fight." Zooey tore a strip of cloth from her sleeve and used it to tie up her hair. "If I were you, I'd never buzz in front of a bug, even if I mastered its language."

"Keep talking for now. Soon, you'll only be able to scream." The demon sneered. "I can feel the power of your soul. It's much stronger than the souls of most bugs. You'll make an excellent opponent for me. It's good to fight you in my last battle."

"And then? When I'm executed, what will happen to you? Did you pull me into this fight just because you want to vent your anger on me?"

"Yes, that's right. Fight! Kill! Torture! Upgrade! Bug, that's the

attitude of an advanced species! Did you expect me to kneel on the ground and beg you for mercy?" Kabradhabi emitted a long, loud cry. "What's so scary about death? My soul will be taken in by the Fountain of Magic and when my species reaches the top, my soul will return to the world!"

"You'd better hurry up," Zooey said with a straight face. "They'll execute me any minute."

"Rest assured." Kabradhabi grinned grimly. "You don't understand the mysteries of magic. In this world of consciousness, time will become sluggish and controllable. Here, you'll feel that the blink of an eye is as long as several years. It's my last battle, so I'll do my best to satisfy myself."

Chapter 996: Fight with Pain

...

A long time.

But full of pleasure.

She felt as if she had returned to the battlefield from 400 years ago. But this time, she didn't need to worry about the pain of failure or watching her friends die in her arms. She was free from the heavy burden of responsibility.

Best of all, both she and the demon could feel pain.

The pain made the fighting real.

"Female... I have to say you've done a good job," Kabradhabi said as it threw Zooey's severed arm on the ground. "Although you're a bug, you're much stronger than most of your kind. I really didn't pick the wrong person. Your performance pleases me!"

"Really?" Zooey answered vaguely, then spat a piece of flesh from her mouth, "Unfortunately, your flesh tastes disgusting."

Was this the fifth day since the battle began...or the seventh day? It was difficult to estimate the passage of time without the sun, moon, and stars, so she could only roughly estimate it based on her body's natural reactions. Time here should be fixed in a cycle. For example, thirst and hunger would suddenly disappear when they became apparent and then reset. It was sensible to regard this cycle as a day. Otherwise, it would be impossible for people to fight for years. They would lose strength and be unable to move within days.

She felt a sharp pain from her arm where it had been cut off. It was obviously an unfair battle. The demon could create a long sword with its magic power, while she only had her arms, legs, and teeth.

But Zooey did not care about whether it was fair or not.

Because victory or failure was not important.

On the battlefield of old, she had to kill the enemy and protect herself, but not here. Here, the severed limbs would regenerate. No matter how severely she was wounded, she would not lose consciousness. Without death, the pain became eternal.

It was not necessary to use a sword to cause pain.

She noticed that this was the first time that the demon took the initiative to slow down the pace and talk.

"But your persistence is meaningless," the Senior Demon said, as it pressed on its wounded shoulder. The bloody wound quickly recovered. "Attacks like this are nothing to me. If you want to beat me with your teeth, I'm afraid you'll be disappointed. I'll knock out your teeth one by one and then make you swallow them. Get ready for it!"

"But you still feel the pain, don't you?" Zooey gasped and watched her arm recover. "By the way, I'd like to ask one more thing. Is that pain particularly familiar?"

"Female, what do you mean?"

No, I have to be patient. I can't let it see my intoxication, as it'll reduce the fun—

In spite of this, she still couldn't help chuckling. "When you were half dead, you should have felt it every day..." She pointed at the shoulder blade, "Being stabbed here and having your flesh cut away. With how much your body was shaking, you must have felt not so good. Ah, I forgot to tell you. The person who cared for you along the way was me."

"Bug—!" Kabradhabi was furious and lifted his sword, snarling, "I'll crush you!"

...

The sixteenth day, or maybe longer.

The dark ground was covered with blood, mostly reddish-brown, and some black-blue.

In addition, broken limbs, internal organs... and of course, teeth, were scattered everywhere. Although the lost parts would regenerate before long, the blood and scattered parts would not disappear. In this environment, they accidentally slipped again and again. But because of this, Zooey got two weapons— one of her thigh bones and half of the demon's spine.

The former was like a short hammer, and the latter could be used as a sword. As long as they didn't directly hit the demon's magic sword, they were quite useful to her.

400 years was long enough to make her an expert in all kinds of weapons.

And her favorite place to attack was still its shoulder.

Pain was sometimes unrelated to the size of the wound.

"If you're tired, you might take a break now," Zooey said, hanging the spine around her waist and moving her numb wrists. "After all, you have to torture me for a long time. It would be better to take your time."

"..." The demon did not respond for the first time. Its chest heaved as it was breathing deeply, and its scarlet eyes stared at the Extraordinary. The initial contempt faded from its human-like face.

Their relative strength had not changed. The various abilities of a Senior Demon had ensured its superior position in this fight. Zooey needed to pay several times the cost in order to strike her opponent. Once she made a mistake, she would suffer for a long time. It was not unusual that her fingers were broken and her belly was torn apart. Even so, the atmosphere gradually changed.

Zooey did not take any notice of its silence. "Let me ask... Is this

space created by you?"

The demon probably needed to rest for a moment. Kabradhabi slowly said, "This is a stream of consciousness, a combination of magic power and the soul. It doesn't need anyone to create it. It's hard to understand for a bug like you. Almost no one has a chance to enter the stream of consciousness—"

"I've seen a bigger one, which was as complete as a real world," she interrupted. "There were trees, sky, and earth. It's not like here. There is nothing here."

"Nonsense, female!" the demon roared, "You have no idea how much magic power it consumes to construct entities in the stream of consciousness, let alone a complete world! Only the Fountain of Magic can do that!"

"It's the Fountain of Magic again... It's just like the domain of deities, an illusion. No one has been there, but they talk as if they've seen it." Zooey took off the spine bone and held it with her hand.

"This is engraved in the heritage. But you would know nothing about it!"

"Then can you elaborate further and come up with some evidence to convince me?."

"Female, do you think I'm a fool?" Kabradhabi was furious. "How can I, lord Kabradhabi, be deceived by such a clumsy technique—"

Before it finished its words, a "spear" pierced through its head.

The white spear was the spine thrown by Zooey.

"Since you don't want to say anything, then that's the end of the rest. When you want to talk about it, we'll take a rest again." She held the thigh bone and rushed toward the staggering demon.

...

Dozens of days later.

"Why," asked Kabradhabi, who had completely lost its original momentum. It held its Magic Sword in front of its chest, staring at Zooey as if she were a monster, "Don't you fear pain?"

"The war 400 years ago made me accustomed to it, while hibernating for 400 years made me forget it. If you regained something which had always accompanied you, would you fear it?" Zooey raised her lips. At this moment, she no longer had to conceal herself. "In fact, I have to thank you. You've compensated for the feelings which King Roland can't give me."

"You... are crazy!"

"This is only a brief moment compared to hundreds of years. Now, it's your turn to please me."

When Zooey once again stabbed her fingers into the demon's chest, the sight in front of her suddenly twisted. The blood, flesh, and body parts all turned into nothingness, and a strong sensation of dizziness overwhelmed her.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw the hall dome of Third Border City.

Chapter 997: Suppression

"She, she woke up!"

Zooey heard a cry of astonishment and then saw several sharp swords held to her neck.

"Don't move!" Alethea's voice also appeared in her mind, "You'd better stay still until we confirm who you are."

"So that was why..." She noticed that her hands and feet were tied with iron locks, and she was lying on the stone bed where the demon originally was. Her partners were wielding swords, standing guard around her. She thought, "This is indeed a wise decision. It's quite necessary to confine me before they're clear whether it's me or the demon who occupies the shell of the God's Punishment soldier. They did not ask for my identity. Instead, they decided to make the judgment by themselves, which is a mature decision."

After all, since the demon has occupied my body, any answer might be a lie.

If Kabradhabi did not make it up, the dozens of days in the dark stream of consciousness was equivalent to only a few minutes in reality. It must have been Alethea who made the correct judgments and took countermeasures in such a short period of time.

With such partners, I really have nothing to worry about.

When Zooey was about to close her eyes and leave it to them, what she saw in the crowd made her frown.

What are they doing?

She saw another stone bed beneath the magic core. Though she could not see who was lying on it, the answer was almost self-evident as the witches were crowding beside it.

She soon came up with a possibility—

Do they plan to confirm my identity through King Roland's Dream World?

No, no one here can force Roland to do it. If it's real, then it can only have been prompted by himself.

But... this is too inappropriate! How can Alethea agree with this plan? Doesn't she know what the mortal king means to the God's Punishment Witches? What's more, according to the demon's words, their understanding of magic power is far better than ours. If the Dream World is also built by magic power, then it's a risky move to allow a Senior Demon into it.

I shouldn't have praised her!

Thinking of this, Zooey could no longer keep quiet. She cried, "Wait. Don't open the Dream World. I'm Zooey!"

Alethea took a look at her but didn't respond.

"Listen, Kabradhabi can revise the effect of magic power to a certain extent. If you let it enter the Dream World, we don't know what will happen. Wake His Majesty up. Quickly!"

"Oh? Really? To be honest, lying on that stone board is chilling. If I don't put a quilt on it, I really can't fall asleep. But if you were the demon, you could also say that."

Suddenly, a familiar voice echoed behind her.

Zooey tried to raise her neck and look backward. Then she saw a grey-haired man— It was Roland Wimbledon, the mortal king.

She immediately felt relieved.

It turns out that he has not yet lied on it.

Great.

For some reason, her senseless body felt a hint of warmth and satisfaction, as if it were no longer empty, though she did not know how to describe it. Compared with the pain which reminded her the suffering she'd been through, this completely different

feeling made her feel calm and contented.

Zooey lightly sighed and said, "Indeed, if the demon occupied this body, it might see this information. So my method is very simple. Just let Ms. Camilla reconnect the demon and me."

"I... I did notice a soul movement just now, so I suspended the Mind Resonance." Noticing everyone staring at her, Camilla Dary hesitatingly replied, "But I can't tell which soul belongs to the demon."

"Are you sure that you want to enter the Mind Resonance state?" Roland asked.

"Yes, Your Majesty. There isn't a third soul here. Once it admits, you'll know the truth."

"Make the demon... admit?" The crowd did not know how to respond.

"No matter what happens, it won't get worse anyway," Pasha said. "It doesn't matter if you try. If Zooey is on the other side, I'll be able to tell."

"In that case," Roland looked around and quickly made a decision. "Connect them again."

The familiar sensation quickly enveloped her. Zooey directly transmitted her thoughts to Kabradhabi's mind, "I said before. I won't stop until I'm satisfied."

"Female—don't be too proud!" Almost at the same time, she heard the angry voice of the demon.

"If you don't want to talk about this, then I'll change a topic. You should know what I am thinking now?"

"Well, why should I admit? Use your own method to tell." The demon sneered, "I would like to see how you'll distinguish between different souls without knowledge of the stream of consciousness."

"If you don't say it, then I'll just go directly," Zooey said

carelessly.

"Wait, wait... What does that mean?"

"Of course, going to your side. I can use the resonance channel to transfer my soul and enter the stream of consciousness. I suddenly realize I can also do that. Though you keep saying we're bugs, actually, the Extraordinaries are similarly sensitive to the flow of magic power. Even if I can't explain it, I can try to imitate it." She chuckled and said, "Do you remember what I said before? If you don't tell me, then it's the end of your rest."

The voice of Kabradhabi suddenly changed. "No... female, I mean... wait!"

"Even if you transfer again, it doesn't matter. I can still catch you easily. After all, there are just two shells." Zooey said carelessly, "Well, this time it'll be far more than a few dozen days. Are you ready?"

Mind Resonance did not mean you couldn't lie, especially when one side was in a weak situation. When the demon felt her overwhelming evil intent, it finally closed its mouth.

A moment later, it grinned—using the shell of the crippled God's Punishment soldier. Though it sounded a bit panicky, it still tried its best to bluff, "Enough! You bugs, how dare you to force lord Kabradhabi! But it can't be helped, this time, I'll concede that to you!"

"Keep quiet. Don't scare His Majesty," Zooey said unhappily through her consciousness.

"Ahem, female—" The demon was choked by her words, "You're trampling on the dignity of the senior race!"

"You've had enough rest?"

"You—" It glared at the Extraordinary hatefully and decided to swallow what it wanted to say. It lowered its voice and said bitterly, "Don't think that you can always win. Wars like this are

just trivial setbacks for us! You low-grade bugs, you have no idea what's on the other side of the mainland. The army of Sky-sea Realm is engulfing the land little by little, trying to turn the whole world into an abyss. If it were not to stop them, you, with such poor power, would have been crushed into ashes by us 400 years ago!"

Chapter 998: A Real Strong Power

What Kabradhabi said made everyone frown.

According to it, demons were waging war on two fronts and the enemy that humanity had never even met was their chief opponent.

That meant, during the previous Battles of Divine Will, the demons had only sent a small part of their army to battle humanity. Knowing this, Roland and the witches, who had been quite confident about the war, started to feel less optimistic.

There were four species depicted in the giant paintings in the Divine Land and the underground civilization had already been eliminated. Given that, Roland speculated that the so-called "Sky-sea Realm" was the homeland of the species in the fourth picture. It was the most mysterious among the four and was a portrait of some deep-sea eyeballs.

Did demons wage a war against the monsters in the sea right after they defeated the underground civilization and seized its relic? And they simultaneously managed to crack down on mankind in the Land of Dawn.

If it's true, it's no wonder that the Senior Demon showed utter contempt for the witches.

As for the common people without any magic power, Kabradhabi probably thinks of us as nothing more than useless weeds.

On the other hand, Roland was clear that the demon might have lied to them. Kabradhabi was an unyielding fighter. It had led its troop to penetrate deep into the artillery squad and had utilized the Mind Resonance to invade Zooey's body. Obviously, it knew how to mask its intentions and to never give up fighting, even in the face of great adversity. Since no one was able to check whether it was lying, it might have been bluffing, trying to incite panic.

Everyone looked grave. Roland knew that he needed to bring the situation back under his control as soon as possible.

He shrugged and pretended to feel at ease. He looked at Alethea.

"So... this handicapped warrior is the demon?"

"Yeah, I guess so. I don't know how Zooey did this, but she'd never say anything like that," Alethea replied.

"Good, you saved me the trouble of taking a nap." Roland nodded to Zooey. "You can eat whatever you want in tonight's trip to the Dreamland"

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Zooey's lips could not help curling into a smile, but soon her expression returned to normal. "Unfortunately, this guy is already accustomed to our way of thinking. Although it's still unable to flexibly control the body, we can't read his real thoughts through Mind Resonance that easily now."

"It's not your fault. After all, no one has pried deeply into a Senior Demon's mind before. It's natural for you to misjudge the situation."

"Demon? You still call us by such a ridiculous name." Kabradhabi sniggered. "You look upon the other species as evil incarnate without realizing that you yourselves are nothing but backward barbarians. Your good days will end soon. When the Fountain of Magic appears again, you'll die out!"

All the people looked at each other simultaneously, since the Fountain of Magic mentioned by the demon reminded them of a thing in their legend.

"Is the Fountain of Magic... the Bloody Moon?" asked Roland.

"You bugs always see the surface." The Senior Demon did not give him a definite answer.

"Is the red sphere made of magic power?" Agatha interjected.

"But that wouldn't make sense. I've seen the Red Moon with my own eyes. No matter what it is, it's way too far away from us. You said the final winner would open the door to the Fountain of Magic. It's impossible unless you can build a ladder to the heavens."

Kabradhabi snorted and turned its head away without explaining anything.

"Where's the Sky-sea Realm?"

The demon refused to respond.

"Did you destroy the underground civilization?"

The demon still remained silent.

"Is your new technology part of the inheritance of the underground civilization? I mean the deformed creature that is capable of growing out black pillars?"

"Save it, bug." Kabradhabi finally opened its mouth to speak. "I've already told you all that I can say. As for the things that I can't say, you'll never force me to tell you, even if you send this female to—" The demon paused for a while and glanced at Zooey. "I won't give you any more information! If you want to kill me, you'd better hurry up. Otherwise, you'll be eliminated by Emperor Hect Zod. And I, Kabradhabi, will be reborn in the Fountain of Magic!"

Now that the interrogation had hit a bottleneck, Roland decided to stop questioning the Senior Demon and leave it to the Taquila witches. He believed that they would be able to get it to talk someday, for its soul had already been transferred into a disabled God's Punishment Warrior.

With this thought in mind, Roland said with his hands laid out, "You don't want to talk about sensitive things, so how about we change the subject. You said that your last defeat was just a trivial setback for your army, so how powerful are you? What about the army of the Sky-sea Realm? Are they stronger than you? And you

mentioned the Sky Lord just now. I want to know how powerful the lord is. Is he a match for a Transcendent? These things aren't confidential, are they?"

Given the demon's character, Roland was confident that it would never miss such a perfect opportunity to boast of their strength.

"Oh, bug..." As Roland had expected, Kabradabi said loudly. "I can tell you. Our power is far beyond your imagination! Do you know why we call you bugs? It's because the difference between an advanced race and a backward species is like that between birds and bugs. It's determined by the nature of magic power. At the other end of this continent, on the border of our territory and the Sky-sea Realm, our soldiers are countless. When we march together, the mountains tremble. Our enemies from the Sky-sea Realm are as strong as us. Otherwise, how could you have survived until now?"

Kabradhabi paused for a moment and then continued. "As for the Transcendents, if you're referring to the most powerful females, they could have been counted as the Sky Lord's rivals in the past, but now, the lord has enhanced its strength and become a prudent and smart commander. If it had led the army in the last battle to fight you, it would have been able to drain the blood from all of you by itself! Bug, when you hear that the Sky Lord is coming, you'd better kneel down and beg for mercy. This way, you can die faster and suffer less!"

Roland automatically dismissed the demons' exaggeration and captured several implicit clues in its words. For the demon army, logistics is always a major obstacle to their movement. Without Red Mist, they can't go anywhere. Therefore, such a large demon army must fight close to their black stone tablets.

Surprisingly, the army from the Sky-sea Realm can combat the demons in the Red Mist and drag the demon army's main forces into a quagmire of war. That means, they aren't just "as strong as" the demons. The Senior Demon apparently doesn't want to talk too

much about this matter, which suggests about its attitude toward the Sky Lord and its army.

In addition, it never called the enemies from the Sky-sea Realm bugs or worms, which means that the sea monsters have already "upgraded" themselves. Here's a glaring contradiction. The Senior Demon claims that they are also an advanced race, but up until now, we've only known of one race in the Battle of Divine Will getting eliminated. Wait a moment, Kabradhabi never said that demons wiped out the underground civilization. It just said that each species had to go to the Sky-sea Realm to get a shard. Something is missing here.

When the Senior Demon was still crowing about how mighty its race was, Roland interrupted it.

"In fact, you don't know true power."

"You—" Kabradhabi pulled a long face. "Bug, what do you know?"

"A real, strong power, won't bring darkness to the world. Instead, it'll dispel the myth, be willing to burn itself to illuminate and warm the world... just like the sun."

"What... exactly are you talking about?"

"It's simple." Roland cleared his throat. "You guys are so powerful, so why don't you light the fire?"

The demon seemed at a loss when Roland stood up and left with the witches. He walked toward the gate leading out of the hall, back straight, without looking back.

Chapter 999: Witness the Glory

Roland and the witches were having a meeting in the castle's conference hall in Neverwinter.

Everyone looked worried, especially Agatha and Phyllis. They could not feel good after hearing so many subversive ideas about the demons and the world itself from Kabradhabi.

In this war that had lasted for hundreds of years, thousands of people had been killed. Human beings had already lost the vast majority of their territory and shrunk into a corner of the Land of Dawn. Now, the witches had discovered that mankind was not demons' rival. On the other side of the continent, there was a place called Sky-sea Realm, and the monsters from that place were as strong as demons. They entangled the main forces of demons and thus gave human beings an opportunity to survive.

It was a terrible blow to the faith of the Taquila witches.

Seeing the grim-faced ancient witches, the members of the Witch Union and Sleeping Spell also felt oppressed by worry.

In the previous battle, they had taken the initiative to attack the demons' outpost and had achieved a remarkable victory with little cost. It was the most splendid record in this war for human beings. Nevertheless, lots of serendipitous stuff had come into play in this battle. The demons had not had a clear idea of their opponent, and the First Army had happened to see through their trap. Thus, they took this chance to defeat the demons using the combat mode that they were best at. That meant this success could not be copied. If casualties increased significantly during the war, human beings who had already lost lots of land and population would have a slim hope of winning the Battle of Divine Will.

"Perhaps Kabradhabi just made up a story to deceive us," said Wendy, who felt that she needed to say something to boost everyone's morale. "After all, no one has ever been to the other

side of the continent. Who knows if it's true or not? I think we'd better not think too much before we can confirm it. How about you?"

No one answered.

Agatha cast a thankful gaze at Wendy. "Although Kabradhabi might have exaggerated the facts purposely, I don't think it was lying, especially when it just woke up after the Soul Transfer. At that time, it could hardly control its body, let alone weigh every word before saying them out. Zooey should be able to feel it as well. The things it mentioned at the beginning turned out to be consistent with the story it told us later. To act so naturally in front of us, it had to prepare the story in advance and train itself for a long time. Could it possibly do that there?"

"So, you mean it told us the truth about the legacy shard?" Scroll asked, with a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Yes. If I understand Kabradhabi correctly, it told us that any species could upgrade themselves with the legacy shard, namely the relics of gods." Agatha explained slowly. "If demons are able to defeat us once and for all, why didn't they try their best to destroy us and seize our relic? There's only one explanation. They really can't."

Many people agreed with Agatha on this point. During the first Battle of Divine Will, when demons had been uncivilized barbarians, the human kingdoms failed to unite together to fight the enemy. The battle had lasted for decades and during that period of time, the underground civilization had tried to make contact with mankind. During the second Battle of Divine Will, when the Bloody Moon had come to the world for the second time, demons had become much stronger and had successfully driven the Union out of the Fertile Plains.

If the "upgrade" could bring significant advantage to demons, they should've done their best to eliminate human beings and seize

their relic as soon as possible.

"We really underestimated demons," said Phyllis, who was overwhelmed with remorse. "For the past 400 years, the Union just focused on our familiar places in the Land of Dawn without paying any attention to the world outside. Now, we know little about the other side of the continent, let alone the Sky-sea Realm."

"Oh? What does the other side of this continent look like?" Roland asked curiously.

"I've only read about it in some ancient books. It's said to be an extremely barren land of numerous mountains and cliffs. Its average altitude is much higher than the Land of Dawn," Phyllis recalled. "Tens of kilometers across the sea, there's another continent, but actually these two continents are connected by a lofty mountain range which is surrounded by the sea. Only when the tides are low, can one see the mountain. Most of the time, the tides are high and half of the mountain is submerged in the sea. According to the legend, demons came to the Land of Dawn through this mountain."

"Wait, it sounds familiar. I think I've heard it from..." Roland touched his chin and wondered. Suddenly, a bolt of lightning flashed across his mind!

The ancient witch's description reminded Roland of Thunder's findings in the Shadow Waters, which included a seaside plateau, a vast cliff and a huge stone gate embedded in the cliff, though Phyllis did not mention a gate like that. "Did Thunder's exploration team somehow see the continent opposite to the Land of Dawn?" Roland thought.

That's interesting. More than half of the Land of Dawn lies to the northwest of Neverwinter, but the Shadow Sea is located in the east. How could the exploration team see the undiscovered continent opposite to the Land of Dawn through a telescope? As long as this planet is a sphere, they could at most see the sky above

that continent no matter how advanced the telescope is. How come they could directly observe such a faraway land? Something must be wrong here.

He noticed that Tilly, a member of Thunder's exploration team, was looking at him contemplatively. Obviously, she also thought of the wonders she had seen in the underwater stone tower in the Shadow Islands ruins.

Roland wondered. The building on the Shadow Islands isn't constructed by the Union, but it's apparently a watchtower overseeing the continent which is deemed to be the homeland of demons. Who's the owner of the building?

For my country and my people, I have to figure it out and thoroughly investigate the Shadow Islands ruins. I must give this mission to Thunder before he goes to the sea. Instead of having a quick glance at the place, he needs to carefully look into this problem this time.

"Your Majesty?"

Roland had been deeply absorbed in thoughts for a long time. When he heard someone calling him, he stopped wondering and found that Agatha was looking at him sympathetically. "Are you alright?"

"Ah... I was just thinking about something." He waved his hand.

"Please don't worry too much. I know this news causes stress for you, but we still have hope," The Ice Witch said in a soft voice. "When I just woke up from the Frozen Coffin, you told me human beings were going to defeat demons... Now, I still firmly believe it, even if it requires hard work of several generations."

"Yes," Phyllis echoed this sentiment. "We are so close to the Taquila ruins now. Once we destroy the demons' base there, they won't get the opportunity to build obelisks and will have to wait at least another 400 years to eliminate us. Even if human beings lose

the war in the end, it's not your fault. Actually, you've done much better than the Three Chiefs."

Roland blinked his eyes in astonishment.

He realized that he must have been frowning when he had been thinking about the Shadow Islands ruins and his facial expression had made the witches believe that he was terrified by Kabradhabi's story.

He found the witches were just trying to comfort and encourage him.

He could not help shaking his head and chuckled. "It's the worst situation: curling up in a corner all my life and leaving the problem to our later generations. That's not my plan. After all... I probably can't live that long. I'm more interested in defeating all the competitors and solving the mystery by myself. It's such great fun, isn't it?"

"Your Majesty..." Most of the witches seemed confused except Anna, who looked at Roland smilingly.

"Since you guys still remember I said that human beings were going to defeat demons." Roland looked at Phyllis. "Do you still remember another thing I mentioned?"

"A real strong power won't bring darkness to the world. Instead, it'll dispel the myth and be willing to burn itself to light up and warm the world... I wasn't joking with Kabradhabi." Roland did not give the witches any time to respond and continued. "Faced with a mighty power like the sun, everything, including demons, will be burnt to cinders. You'll be able to witness such a power together with me."

Chapter 1000: Sisters

A fire was blazing merrily in a stove, casting a ruddy glow over the floor of the room.

Azima felt warm in her house. She watched snowflakes drifting in the north wind outside the window while listening to the crackling of the flames in the fireplace. In the past, when winter had come, she would have suffered severe frostbite on her hands and her hand skin would have chapped very easily. It was a memory from her childhood. Back then, she had had to rummage through rubbish in search of food every winter. After moving to the Sleeping Island, her hands got even worse because of the long-term exposure to salty seawater.

After all these years, she was already accustomed to the pain of frostbite. For her, it was nothing compared to the misery of being a tramp on the streets. However, right now, there were only a few shallow cracks on her fingers. She did not feel any pain or see any blood in them. She enjoyed this pain-free winter. She had not had such a comfortable experience for years.

She came to understand that the living environment of Neverwinter was exceptionally good and even ordinary houses were much better here than their counterparts in other towns.

For example, a thick mortar was applied to both sides of the walls of this brick house and each corner of the window was closely connected to the bricks. No matter how strong the snowstorm was outside, the people inside the house would never be affected. Without such a sturdy house, the fire could hardly warm up the whole room. If Azima was now in an ordinary residence of Valencia, she would hear a whistle of a wind blowing through cracks of the door and the window and many other clefts in the house.

In addition, there was a tunnel inside the fireplace, which was

connected to the bedroom adjoining this living room. With such a heat supply pipeline, the bed would be warm when she and her sisters put out the fire and went to bed at night.

And those designs were only a small part of the new things she discovered in Neverwinter. Similar details were everywhere in this city. The longer she lived here, the more she wondered. "Maybe they didn't build this city to survive at this place."

"They built it this way in order to enjoy their lives."

"As for why they built it in the Western Region, the highest-hit area during the Months of Demons, it must be because of the strong contrast. In a place where all year is springtime, one would not feel anything special in a warm room. By contrast, in a place of ice and snow, one would be deeply impressed and satisfied by the warmth. They must think that only a seemingly impossible thing is worth doing and take pride in such an achievement."

For a moment, she really believed this speculation.

"The soup is ready. Let's have dinner." Doris walked out of the kitchen while holding a pot of soup and then she placed it on the low table in the living room.

"Thank you." Azima handed a cushion to Doris and then sat down at the table.

There were two dishes and one soup. All of them used bird beak mushrooms as the main ingredient. These fleshy and juicy mushrooms were a specialty of the Western Region. They were tasty and easy to cook. They only needed a little salt instead of lots of seasonings and they did not require a special cooking method. More importantly, they were the least expensive ingredient in Neverwinter and were as cheap as wheat.

"I bought a lot of mushrooms at a clearance sale and stored them in our room," said Doris, happily. "Even if we can't find enough food in the winter, these mushrooms will be enough for us to fill

our stomachs until the spring, though they may become less tasty after a long time."

Azima scooped up some soup with her spoon. Under the reflection of the fire, the oil floating on the soup's surface shone with a golden color and looked quite alluring. When she put a spoon into her mouth, she felt its aroma fill her mouth instantly. After that, the warm soup flowed down all the way into her stomach and warmed her entire abdomen.

The soup was as delicious as before, but now she had no appetite.

After taking two spoonfuls of the soup, Azima put down her small bowl.

"Is there anything wrong?" Doris quickly noticed that Azima seemed to be a little different today.

"I'm wondering... whether my decision was wrong." After a long silence, Azima whispered. "It's my own decision to leave Neverwinter, but because of it, everyone lost the chance of having a better life together with their families in this city. If Whitepear didn't quit her job in the Sleeping Spell, she would now live in a big house equipped with a heating system instead of this small house that doesn't allow us to go about freely in our daily life."

"Why did you suddenly say that..." Doris was stunned and then soothed Azima. "No matter how small our house is, it's able to shelter us from wind and rain. When their relatives have enough money to pay the minimum down payment, they will move out. It's not as good as the house of the Sleeping Spell, but I think it's already good enough for two people to live in. Think about our old days on the streets—"

"But it's different now!" Azima interrupted Doris anxiously.

Azima had been feeling frustrated recently. She overestimated her personal ability and failed to assess the situation correctly. In the past, she had led her sisters to search for food in rubbish and

snatch food from jaws of wild dogs, but now she refused to do anything like that. She did not want to give Tilly and her witches any chance to laugh at them, even though her sisters might not mind leading such a life.

She had submitted lots of job applications to the City Hall like ordinary residents of the city, but none of them got approved. Literacy was a key requirement in the job descriptions of most positions, and well-paid jobs usually demanded a primary education diploma. She could not meet those requirements and wanted to work in some construction projects or in the Furnace Area, but the Ministry of Construction and the Ministry of Industry only recruited adult males. The City Hall clerk told her that she should go to school to finish her studies first if she wanted to get a promising career.

Among the six sisters, only Doris and Whitepear had jobs. The former was employed by the Witch Union. She further processed Mystery Moon's magnetized copper rods with her enchantment and earned about 30 or 40 silver royals a day, almost as much as the witches living in the castle. But it was just a part-time job. Sometimes, she only worked one day in a week.

Whitepear worked in a tailor's shop as an ordinary worker. Considering she did not have to use her magic power in this position, she earned the average salary. According to the number of her working days, she usually earned 15 or 20 silver royals a month.

The other sisters were also unemployed just like Azima.

In other words, Doris and Whitepear had to afford the living expenses of the six sisters.

For this reason, Azima felt guilty for the cozy life she had now. She had firmly refused Wendy's invitation because she wanted to prove to Nightingale that she was not a weak person and could live on her own without relying on the Sleeping Spell. She felt

embarrassed by the current situation.

That was why she sounded so impatient when talking to Doris.

She felt regret right as soon as she interrupted Doris. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..."

"It's okay." Doris held Azima's hands. "I know how you feel and I want to tell you it wasn't your own decision to leave the Sleeping Spell. We also agreed with you. It's not your fault. As for the living expenses, please don't mind it. You've done so much for us and now it's time for us to pay you back."

"You don't owe me a thing. I helped you without expecting to receive anything in return."

"That's the same for us. See what I mean?" Doris blinked and said.

"But..." Azima did not know what to say at this moment since she was moved deeply by Doris' honesty and sincerity. She had not felt so touched for many years and could not adapt to it at the moment, but she soon managed to control herself and reminded herself that as the leader of the sisters, she should never mention those stupid things again.

At this moment, someone knocked on the door.

"Who's it?" She hurriedly turned her head, pulled her hands back and stood up, trying to cover her feelings.

"It's me, Wendy," the person outside answered. "His Majesty wants to talk to you."

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